

Imaginative
Tales # 3

LIFE A BIT DULL? THEN HAVE YOURSELF A BALL!
WHEN MAGICIANS HOLD A CONVENTION IT'S A—

BLACK MAGIC HOLIDAY

By Robert Bloch

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Imaginative Tales #3

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Complete Uproarious Novel

BLACK MAGIC HOLIDAY

by Robert Bloch

Page 4

Novelette

THE EARTHLIGHT COMMANDOS

by Raymond E. Banks

Page 108

Short Story

PRIVATE SECRETARY

by Ed Ritter

Page 126

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Chapter 1

IT MUST have been the fickle finger of Fate.

There is no other explanation possible. It was the fickle finger of Fate, moving at random over the map, which descended upon Davenport, Iowa, plunged through the roof of Moe Hare's Furniture Factory, tapped Bill Dawson on the head and granted him a two-week vacation with absolutely nothing to do.

Destiny's capricious phalange pointed the way to New York, and Bill went there. After all, why not? He was twenty-six, an orphan, unattached, and he'd been reading back issues of *The New Yorker* at the public library for years. It might be a fine place to spend a vacation. So Bill reasoned, or thought he reasoned—but actually, it was Fate's fingernail scratching away inside his brain.

It followed him on his trip, sat up with him on the day-coach, yanked him into a taxicab at Grand Central, and directed him at random to one of the big city's famed hostellries—the Hotel Flopmoor by name. The fickle finger guided his hand as he registered, indicating room 522. It notched into his collar, guided him through the streets that first evening, and turned

his head away from any sights that might prove interesting.

Fate had plans for Mr. Bill Dawson—big plans. And the finger was very definitely on him. It rode back up with Bill on the elevator that night, after a stroll down 42nd Street. It almost helped him undress, in its eagerness to get him into bed. As a last gesture, it was the fickle finger of Fate that tucked the covers around Bill's neck and stroked his forehead into a dreamless sleep.

At least, Bill thought it was dreamless until he opened his eyes. It seemed as if his wristwatch indicated midnight. It seemed as though somebody had switched on the bedlamp. It seemed as though there was a stranger in bed with him.

Bill lay on his side and stared. Yes, there was a man lying in bed beside him—a long, thin man whose long thin legs were desperately tangled in the blankets.

The long, thin man had a long thin face, and his sardonic grey eyes snapped behind gleaming spectacles as he favored Bill with a long, thin smile.

"Pardon me," said the intruder. "I don't believe we've met. My name is Marmaduke Hicks."

BILL GOGGLED, but not for long. For a second voice came from somewhere behind his back. Bill whirled in the bed. To his utter dismay he found himself staring into another face lying on that side; a fat, moon-face, supported by a pudgy body. The smiling little fat man brushed a chubby hand through a tangle of red hair. He ignored Bill's gaze and peered over at the thin gentleman.

"Hicks!" he shouted, cordially. "How did you get here?"

"Crawled through the transom, Tubby."

"Good for you," said Tubby. "I've been hiding in the closet for ever so long. Think he's spotted us?"

"Who? You mean old Bipple? He's too drunk."

"I wish I was," said the fat man, wistfully. "I've never been too drunk." He smiled at Bill. "Pardon me, stranger, but you don't happen to have a little something around, do you?"

Bill sat up in bed and grimaced.

"Anti-social, eh?" grunted Mr. Hicks. "Guess there's nothing we can do about it, then."

"You can get out of my bed," Bill suggested. "I want to go to sleep."

"Hear that, Hicks?" asked the fat man. "He wants to sleep."

"Well, let him. I'm sure I won't disturb the lazy swine. But it's a fine thing, I must say, when a host hasn't the simple courtesy to stay awake and entertain guests when they drop in on him."

"We could sing him a lullaby," suggested Tubby, with elaborate irony, "Or tell him a bedtime story."

"Listen here," Bill grated. "I don't know who you are or what you're doing in my room, but you'll have to get out. You two are either drunk or crazy, and I don't care which."

"I care," replied Mr. Hicks, "And I'd much rather be drunk. Come to think of it, I am."

"Now, look," Bill began—but his tirade was interrupted. An ominous knocking shook the door of the room.

"Open up in there!" shouted a voice.

"Good Lord," whispered Mr. Hicks. "It's Bipple!" He slithered down in the bed and pulled the covers over his head. The fat man attempted to follow suit, but too late. For a key grated in the lock and a man entered the room. He switched on the light, revealing his harsh, square-jawed countenance to Bill and Tubby.

"Aha!" The square jaw waggled accusingly. "Caught you! Telbertson, what are you doing in that bed?"

He addressed the fat man, who timidly squeaked out a reply. "That's a very personal question," he said. "But if you must know, I'm having a baby."

"Thieves! Swindlers! Deadbeats!" The manager's voice rose with each word. "For two years you've been sneaking from room to room in this hotel, moving in with guest after guest, ducking the house detective, ducking me. You have ruined my temper, broken my health, driven me to the horrors of drink."

As if to prove his point, Manager Bipple produced a flask from his side pocket and gave a convincing imitation of a man being driven to drink. It needed no glance at his flushed face to see that this was not his first drink; only rage kept him sober.

Tubby Telbertson and Marmaduke Hicks rose from the bed as one man and approached the manager. "Let's settle this affair man to man," Hicks coaxed "Over a friendly drink."

He took the flask, used it, and passed it to Tubby. After a long time, the flask returned to Bipple, who drank again.

"You're a good sport," Hicks said.

"Am I?" asked the manager, with a tipsy giggle.

"Best sport I know. And I've got a sporting proposition for you. We owe you for two years of room rent. What say we play you for it—double or nothing?"

"Oh no you don't!"

Tubby patted the manager on the shoulder. "Come now, that isn't sportsman Bipple talking. Here, have another drink. You got the dice, Hicks?"

Hicks nodded.

"Well, suppose you phone room service for a quart of rye and some ginger ale?"

BIPPLE RAISED his hand to protest, but Hicks waved him aside with a gracious leer. "It goes on our bill, naturally," he explained. "Drinks on us. Well, let's get started."

Bill Dawson clambered out of bed and gathered his pajama tops about him in a flurry of righteous indignation. "You mean you're going to play dice here in my room?" he asked. "I demand that you get out and let me go to sleep. I don't know whose idea of a joke this is, but it's my room and I want you to leave."

"It's not your room." This, surprisingly enough from Bipple, "It's my room. I own this hotel and I can shoot dice wherever I please."

"Good old Bipple! Spoken like a true host!" Hicks patted the inebriated manager on the back, then squatted on the floor and produced a pair of dice, "Now, how much do we owe you?" he asked.

"Let's see," Bipple fumbled for a bill as Tubby phoned room service. "Ah, here we are. Comes to exactly four thousand, six hundred and forty-three dollars and fifty cents," Bipple droned. "That includes the liquor you just ordered, of course."

"Fair enough. Shall we say double or nothing?"

"Well—" Tipsy as he was, the manager hesitated. Bill chose that moment to open his mouth again.

"Get out of here!" he yelled "Don't be a fool!"

"Nobody tells me what to do," Bipple retorted. "Of course I'll make it double 'r nothing. Whose dice?"

Hicks, Bipple and Tubby knelt and peered at the cubes. Tubby scooped them up in one pink paw and rattled them, rolled them in an ivory pattern across the rug.

"Seven!" the fat man shouted. And seven it was. "You lose Bipple."

A tap on the door sent Bill on his way. He half-expected to see a couple of uniformed men bearing straitjackets, and in his present confusion he would probably have donned one himself. But it was only the bellboy bringing up the drinks.

The bellboy poured expertly, and before Bill could protest he found a tall glass of rye and soda thrust in his hand. He gulped air, then his drink. The bellboy stood smirking at him.

"Will that be all, sir? he inquired.

Tubby nudged Mr. Hicks. "Wants his tip, I guess," he whispered.

Hicks nodded. "Look, boy," he began. "I'll shoot you for the tip. My dollar against your quarter."

"Well—" The bellboy hesitated.

"Go ahead," Bipple boomed, downing his rye with more alacrity than ginger-ale. "See what a sport I am? Just lost over four thousan' to my good friends here. Go ahead and shoot!"

THE BELLBOY squatted. Dice rolled. Bill edged closer. This was madness, but interesting.

"Three!" yelled Tubby. "You lose the quarter. Shoot you for another, same odds." The bellboy lost a dollar as fat little Mr. Telbertson's fingers thumped the dice in a savage wardance to the Congo Goddess of Fortune.

And the rye changed hands. Bill, dazed, automatically accepted another drink. It descended on his stomach like a blazing meteor and he looked on with new interest. Thin Mr. Hicks was shaking now, and the bellboy had just lost his uniform.

Manager Bipple drew a roll of bills from his pocket and they disappeared as the dice were cast.

"Roll them?" offered Hicks to Bill. The young man took the dice in nerveless fingers.

"Drink up!" Bipple urged. "What you shooting for?"

"How about his hotel bill?" asked Hicks.

Bill cast a seven.

"You win!" Tubby nudged him and whispered, "Say fifty dollars on this one. Bill shot and made a six, then failed to make a nine. And Tubby had the dice again.

"I've got no money," Manager Bipple confessed downing a drink. "You boys have cleaned me."

"Shoot you for the bridal suite." Tubby offered. "And two brides." He cast and threw an eleven.

"What a lucky dog!" moaned the manager. "I've lost our best

rooms."

"Take the dice," Tubby urged, pressing the now overheated cubes into Bill's hand. "We've got to hold this winning streak."

"Nothing to bet any more." Bipple sighed, in drunken woe.

"Shoot him for the hotel," Hicks suggested to Bill. "Come on, Bipple, be a sport."

"Wager my hotel—are you crazy?" Bipple pleaded.

"Your hotel won't look much good after Tubby here tears out the bridal suite," Hicks reminded him. "Better get it back or lose the whole thing."

"All right," Bipple conceded. "It's a bet."

"Shoot him for the hotel, Bill," Tubby yelled. "Go ahead."

Bill's gaze was blurred, his hand was shaky. He threw the dice and watched them hit the rug through a haze. Four and—three.

"Seven!"

"You won!" Hicks exulted. "You won the hotel!"

"Well, isn't that nice," said Bill. And promptly fainted.



Chapter 2

WHEN BILL opened his eyes he expected everything to be all right. He'd be back in his comfortable bed, the two drunks and the manager would be gone, and the dream would be over.

As it happened, things proceeded a bit differently. To be exact, when Bill opened his eyes he got an ice-bucket of cold water full in the face.

"That'll bring him around," he heard Tubby mutter. "A little water always does the trick."

"Trick!" grumbled a voice Bill identified as belonging to Manager Bipple. "Don't mention that word to me."

Bill sat up and brushed the water from his face and pajama-tops with a towel Hicks thrust into his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"For passing out?" Tubby chuckled. "Think nothing of it. I do it every night—eventually."

"No, not that." Bill strode over to Mr. Bipple. "I mean, about the dice game. Winning your hotel from you. Of course I wasn't serious. I have no intention of holding you to the bet."

Manager Bipple shook his head and smiled. "On the con-

trary, my dear boy, I insist! You won the hotel fair and square and it's all yours."

Bill blinked as he saw that Bipple was serious. Not so Mr. Hicks.

"This calls for a little drink," he said. "All that water makes me thirsty. Tubby, do the honors."

Tubby did. By the time Bill had donned dry pajama-tops the fresh highballs were ready, and so were his companions.

"Here's to our new manager!" Tubby toasted. "May he enjoy his stay here as much as we do."

"That's very generous of you," Bill said, thoughtfully, "but I'm not so sure. You see, I know nothing at all about running a hotel. It must be a pretty big job."

"Nothing to it." Hicks told him. "Calls for no intelligence at all. Look at Bipple here—he got away with it for years."

"But there's five hundred rooms in the Flopmoor. A ballroom and a banquet hall and dozens of bellboys and waiters and cooks and chambermaids—"

"—and millions of cockroaches." Tubby finished for him. "So what? They all know their jobs. All you have to do is sit back and watch the money roll in. My boy, you're in business."

"We'll stick around and help you out, too," Mr. Hicks offered. "I happen to be on friendly terms with most of the staff here—"

"—particularly the chambermaids." Tubby again concluded. "Yes, Bill, we won't let you down. So stop worrying and drink up, I say."

BILL DRANK up but he didn't stop worrying. He turned to Mr. Bipple, painfully aware of a smug smile on that worthy's face.

"See here, Mr. Bipple," he said. "I may be the new owner of this hotel, but that doesn't mean I want to be the active manager. Suppose I make you a deal? You can name your own terms, if you like. How about staying on here as manager?"

To everyone's surprise, Bipple shook his head. The smile faded from his face and for a moment he seemed almost sober.

"No!" he declared, "Ab'sutely no! I'm getting out of here before tomorrow morning and that's that!"

"Wait," Marmaduke Hicks broke in. "What's the big idea? Why all the rush?"

"The Convention starts tomorrow." Bipple explained. "And

I want no part of it,"

"What Convention?"

"The Magician's Convention, that's what. And I'm getting out of here before they get in. You won't catch me going through what I did last year. Whassa matter, don't you remember it?"

"Come to think of it. Tubby and I weren't around that week last year. We went to Florida for a change and a rest."

"The nightclubs the race-tracks got our change," Tubby explained, "and the rest." He peered thoughtfully at Mr. Bipple over the top of his glass. "So that's it! I thought it was funny—you giving up the hotel so gracefully. You wanted to get away from this Convention, eh? Why?"

"You'll find out," Mr. Bipple assured him.

"But please," Bill broke in. "You can't rush off this way and leave me holding the bag."

"What bag?" asked Mr. Hicks, with sudden interest. But Bill continued his plea.

"Surely it can't be so bad that you won't even tell me what to expect," he went on.

"It can!" Bipple shivered. "Why do you suppose I started drinking tonight? Even thinking about those awful magicians is enough to give me the shakes. You wanna know something? I'm glad I lost the hotel—glad, I tell you! Glad, glad, glad!" With each repetition of the word, Manager Bipple had edged closer to the door. Now he opened it and darted out into the hall.

"Goodbye!" he called. "And watch out for Dritch! Whatever you do, beware of Dritch!"

The door slammed behind him. Hicks stared at Tubby who passed the look along to Bill.

"What's a Dritch?" he asked.

"I don't know," Hicks confessed. "But we'll find out. We'll find out lots of things; don't worry,"

"But I am worried. I can't run this hotel alone."

"Tubby and I will help you. First thing to do, of course, is go down to the wine-cellars and take inventory."

"Never mind the wine-cellars. What I want to do is sit down and have a long talk with somebody who really knows the score about this hotel. The assistant manager or the *maitre de hotel*, some one like that. If we're expecting a convention tomorrow I should be prepared. And I'd like to find out what made

Bipple so frightened of these magicians."

"This is no time of night to be thinking about conventions," Tubby grumbled. "Besides, all those people you mentioned must be home in bed. Or somewhere in bed, anyway."

"How about Annabel?" suggested the thin partner.

"The very thing!" Tubby exclaimed. "She's not in bed anywhere, is she? I mean, she's on duty downstairs all night."

"Well, call her and tell her to come on up."

"She might misunderstand."

"That wouldn't stop Annabel. Besides, you can always say the manager wants to see her."

Tubby wobbled over to the telephone and called.

Hicks offered Bill another drink. Bill's acceptance was almost automatic. Only a part of his mind seemed to be functioning; just enough for him to ask, "Who is this Annabel?"

"Old Bipple's niece. She runs the cigar counter in the lobby. One of our favorite people, that girl—you'll like her, wait and see."

But why drag her up to my room in the middle of the night?"

"I could think of several reasons, all good," Hicks observed. "However, right now you want to talk to somebody about running this hotel. Annabel's your girl. She's been here for over a year and she knows the whole routine inside and out."

"She said she'll be right up" Tubby called, from the phone. "So we'd better mix another drink, fast."

THE PARTNERS mixed another drink, fast. Bill sat down on the bed and began to dress with equal haste. He felt, somehow, as though he were beginning to learn a lot about life in the raw, and wondered what he'd learn about life with clothes on.

He had learned about drinking, about gambling, about the pleasures of taking things easy. His education, however, still lacked one most important feature. No man is really educated until he knows about women. Therefore some schools of thought maintain that no man is really educated.

At any rate, Bill Dawson was now about to discover an entire new section of existence—the eternal, infernal feminine.

There was a soft knock and the door opened. A girl entered the room.

"Hello, Annabel," Hicks cried, genially. "What took you so long?"

"Just stopped on the way for a drinkn and a chaser."

"Ten minutes just for a drink?"

"No. But it took me a while to get rid of the chaser. He was very persistent."

"Hi!" piped Tubby. "Just in time." He handed her a glass which she accepted eagerly. She peered over the rim at Bill.

"Who's the new face?" she inquired casually.

"Excuse me," said Bill, rising. "My name's Bill Dawson."

"I'm Annabel Bipple."

"Pleased to meet you."

"You should be," the girl observed. For a moment they stood eyeing each other in appraising silence.

Bill saw that the girl was tall and slender, with the type of figure which is described by female fashion authorities as "interesting" and more exactly characterized by men in the form of a shrill whistle. Annabel's hair had evidently been offered a choice of becoming either blonde or auburn, and had finally adopted the best of both shades. Her face continued the usual combination of eyes, lips and nose. But behind that tilted nose was determination, beyond those full red lips was character, and beyond those deep violet eyes lay a strange new world of hidden, whimsical beauty. A lovely girl but somehow dangerous, Bill decided.

Annabel, meanwhile, was critically interested in this strange staring creature before her. He was tall, blond and young—but there are many men who answer to that description. Yet for some inexplicable reason, Bill intrigued her. She decided it must be his face. There was something incomplete, unfinished about it; something missing in the man's eyes. He looked unawakened and lonely.

Among Annabel's many weaknesses was a liking for unfortunates. Despite her carefully-calculated air of hardness and sophistication, she was a sucker for pigeons, alley-cats, and lost dogs. And this was surely one of the lost dogs of the world. The realization that she felt an instant attraction towards this man caused her to adopt an air of defensive mockery. She knew she had designs on this man, and she was a finished artist. Consequently, Bill was already a finished man.

Annabel broke the silence at last. Furious with herself for feeling sympathetic, she disguised her attitude in an outward insolence. "Well," she asked, "have you finished your inspection? Or must I go into my dance?"

"You were staring at me, too," Bill flushed defensively.

"Was I? Well you can hardly blame me. Who is this creature, Hicks? Did you suddenly decide to start a rescue mission?"

"Not at all," the tall gentleman assured her. "As a matter of fact, Bill is the new owner of the Flopmoor."

CAREFULLY, Hicks explained to her just what had happened earlier in the evening. Annabel listened closely and nodded.

"What a tragedy," she mused "My poor uncle out of a job and the whole hotel at the mercy of this—this—"

"Hey," Bill interrupted. "It's not that bad. After all, I'm not a complete idiot."

"You mean there's something missing?"

"Please, no insults. After all, this may come as quite a shock to you—I mean, about your uncle and all—but at least you might be courteous about it."

"I am courteous," Annabel observed, deliberately goading him into a rage. "Otherwise I'd probably burst out laughing whenever I looked at you, you long-legged squirt."

"Who's a long-legged squirt?"

"You are."

"Listen," said Bill goaded by alcohol and exasperation alike. "Nobody can get away with calling me a name like that. I have half a mind to do something about it."

"You may have half a mind," the girl retorted, "but what can you do about it?"

Bill stepped forward, grabbed the bewildered Annabel by the shoulders, propelled her to a chair, sat down, turned her over, and applied the palm of his hand repeatedly to the most likely available spot.

"This is what they do in the movies," he muttered, grimly.

"Well, I'll never go to the movies with you," the girl gasped. Then, "Ouch—you're hurting me!" Her hardboiled exterior was breaking down rapidly. So, she feared, was something else.

"Squirt, eh?" Bill muttered "I'll show you!" He emphasized each word with a hearty whack.

"Oh," fumed the enraged girl, "You'll pay for this!"

Bill released her suddenly and she slid to the floor. For a moment Annabel sat there stupefied, then her violet eyes misted and she indulged in the common feminine reaction. Somewhat awkwardly, Bill knelt beside her and proffered his handkerchief.

"Blow," he suggested, chivalrously.

When Annabel's eyes were clear again she looked at the young man with deeper insight. She had never expected anything like this, -and it knocked out her plans for casual dalliance completely. This man might be a lost dog, but he knew his way around. He had, she mused, rising and patting herself gingerly, left his mark on her.

"I'm sorry," Bill said. "Guess I lost my temper."

"That's all right. I deserved it," The words came out before she could stop them.

"Let's be friends," Bill placated. "Forget all about this."

"Right," Annabel turned to Tubby. "Quit staring at me, you little rounder and mix up some drinks."

"Coming right up," Tubby announced. Hicks, whose mouth was never closed except around the neck of a bottle, looked amiably at Bill and Annabel.

"Glad you two have decided to make up," he said. "Looks like you hit it off all right."

"Let's forget about hitting, if you don't mind," Annabel begged. "It brings back all-too tender memories."

"We have other problems." Hicks agreed. "Such as running this hotel. Don't forget, the convention arrives tomorrow—for that matter, I'll bet most of the magicians checked in tonight. We'll have to figure out what to do."

"The Magician's Convention?" Annabel jumped up. "No wonder my uncle left so suddenly."

"Then you know something? All we could get out of him was a few hints."

"That's plenty. Plenty for me." The girl started for the door. "Excuse me, I have to pack."

"Please—you can't run out on us now." Tubby begged.

"I'm relying on you to show me the ropes," Bill added.

"It would be a pleasure," declared the girl. "But this convention is another matter. Whenever I think about last year, I feel like going to bed and pulling the covers over my head."

"A fine idea." Hicks leered. "Go right ahead."

"Never mind that. I'm serious."

"But what about those magicians?" Bill persisted. "What did they do that's so awful?"

"What didn't they do? For three days this hotel was full of rabbits and white mice and black cats and pigeons. The cats chased the mice and the pigeons chased the people."

"What about the rabbits?"

"They chased each other. It was a mess. And all those pres-tidigitators, pulling knives and forks out of their sleeves in the dining room and changing the color of peoples' drinks in the bar, and making the potted palms in the lobby grow before your eyes—you never saw anything like it."

"Sounds like fun," Bill mused. "Why is everybody so scared of a thing like that?"

"Dritch," sighed Annabel.

"Dritch? Seems to me Mr. Bipple was using that word. What on earth is a Dritch?"

"It isn't a Dritch, it's Mr. Dritch. And I'm not so sure he's on earth."

"Huh?"

"He's a terrible little man—or maybe not a man."

"I'm getting more confused every minute," Bill declared.

"So were we, during the last convention. He showed up and took a room, him and his beard. And his friends. I don't know which was the worst—his beard or his friends. We tangled with both of them. The important thing is, nobody has been able to use that room since."

"Why?"

"Because," whispered Annabel, "It's haunted!"



Chapter 3

SEVERAL drinks later, the party went down to the lobby and approached the night clerk at the desk.

"It's my duty as manager," Bill had persisted. "Besides, if this Dritch shows up again this year, I want to know what he's been doing."

As for Hicks and Tubby, they were only too willing to co-operate, particularly after the last of the whiskey was gone.

Annabel stayed discreetly in the background. Not seeing her, the clerk assumed the men to be strangers.

"I'm sorry," he said, looking up from his ledger. "I'm afraid I'm out of rooms."

"Aren't you in one now?" Hicks quibbled.

"No, gentlemen, you don't understand. There's a convention in town and we're all full."

"So is the convention," muttered Tubby, unhelpfully. "But never mind that now. We want the key to the haunted room."

"What?"

"I'm the new manager," Bill offered. "Didn't Mr. Bipple tell you?"

"Oh—Mr. Dawson!" The clerk beamed. "Yes, Mr. Bipple

did mention your name in passing. But he passed awfully fast. I never saw a man leave this hotel in such a hurry. You'd have thought the Devil himself was at his heels. And come to think of it, with this particular convention coming up—" The clerk shrugged eloquently. "Seeing as you're the new manager I'd better warn you. These magicians are a pretty queer bunch. Particularly Mr. Dritch, that little man with the beard. Mr. L. Dritch, he called himself, and—"

"Blast Mr. Dritch!" Bill exploded. "That's all I hear around here. All I want is the key to the haunted room."

"Please, don't go up there," warned the clerk, "It hasn't been opened for a year. The chambermaids say there's something terribly wrong with the furniture, and other things."

"I've been in plenty of hotel rooms," Hicks remarked, "and none of them were haunted by anything worse than bedbugs."

"Remember, sir, I warned you. I take no responsibility."

"Pooh to your ghosts," Tubby sneered, brandishing a bottle. "Look, we're bringing our own spirits."

"Very well, then." The clerk produced a key. "But let me know if you see any astral phenomena. Or anything that might be construed as partly astral."

"Half-astral, even," Hicks nodded "Very well, as you say. Let's go."

Brandishing the key to Room 1013, Bill and the partners joined Annabel and made for the elevator. A bellboy stepped forward and accosted Bill.

"Carry your baggage, mister?" he inquired.

"No thanks," said Annabel. "I'll walk." The party whisked into the elevator and ascended. Bill found himself suddenly quite nervous; partly because of the nature of their coming adventure and partly because of the close proximity of Annabel. The lively young lady and her livelier companions had already done strange things to him, and he feared that if they sowed any more wild oats he might be ploughed under in the process.

Room 1013 proved on first glance to be a spacious apartment with a large number of chairs, several handsome tables, and a fine sofa. There was also a massive bed.

"Looks comfortable enough," Tubby commented. "Certainly can't see anything wrong with this set-up."

Speaking of set-ups," Hicks said, "that reminds me. Where's the bottle?" Tubby produced a fifth; Bill switched on all the

lights and closed the door, and Annabel pulled the shades. The room was still for a moment as they instinctively waited for something to happen. Nothing did. Silently, Hicks passed the bottle around. Gurgling, then more silence.

"Well," sighed Bill, "let's make ourselves comfortable and wait for developments." Suiting action to word, he lowered himself into the nearest chair.

"Hey, be careful!" came a voice out of nowhere. "Who do you think you're sitting on?"

Bill hastened to rise. "What's this?" he gasped.

"An order, buddy," continued the soft, deep voice. "Don't sit on me."

Bill appealed to his companions. "Am I crazy, or did that chair just speak to me?"

"I wouldn't vouch for your sanity, brother," purred the voice, "but I certainly did speak to you. I'm sick and tired of having strangers flop all over my lap."

The partners goggled. "A talking chair," said Annabel. "So that's what's been going on here."

"You can sit on my lap anytime, sister," the chair beguiled.

"Why not?" A new voice chimed in, from the direction of the sofa in the corner. "Drape yourself all over, if you like. This one is on me." The invitation was followed by a gurgle of low laughter.

THE MEN listened to this unusual suggestion with mounting apprehension. Only Annabel showed no dismay. She turned to the sofa in defiance. "One more crack like that," she warned, "and I'll knock the stuffing out of you."

She had scarcely finished speaking when a pillow detached itself from the sofa and sailed through the air, striking her smartly on the head.

"Hold it, sister," the sofa advised, calmly, "I'm liable to get rough."

Annabel huddled in the center of the room. "I'm beginning to understand what they meant by a haunted room all right."

"I'm not," Tubby complained. "But I'm afraid I will unless I have another drink." He set the fifth of whiskey on a small table and turned to his companions. "Have a shot," he invited.

"Thanks," said a voice behind him. "Don't mind if I do." Tubby turned just in time to see the bottle upset itself and poured whisky on the table's surface, which absorbed the liquor

rapidly.

"Wheeee!" chortled the voice. "This is better than furniture polish. Now have one on me."

Tubby was trembling, but he managed to snatch the bottle before it emptied further. He drank and the others quickly followed his example.

"I don't understand it," Bill whispered. "Could we possibly have a ventriloquist in the crowd?"

"No," said the chair. "It's a pity, though—you'd make a lovely dummy."

Bill's temper gave way for a second time that evening. "Shut up!" he told the chair. "I'd like to break your legs."

"You and who else?" jeered the furniture.

"Yes," added a large, feminine-looking bureau in the corner. "Lay off the rough stuff," it continued in a girlish voice.

Bill regarded the bureau with a menacing eye. Then, "How would you like a good kick in the drawers?" he demanded.

A shrill burst of laughter greeted this remark. "Why you fresh thing!" taunted the bureau. "That's no way to speak to a lady."

Goaded beyond belief by this insane conversation with wood-work, Bill forgot what he was saying or doing. "Lady indeed!" he shouted. "Look at those drawers. Great knobby things! Besides, they're half-open."

"What a thing to say!" shrieked the voice.

Bill turned to his friends. "Let's get out of here," he panted. "Talking furniture—haunted rooms—I've had just about all I can take for one evening."

At that moment came a furious knocking at the door. Half-suspecting a trick, Mr. Hicks gingerly turned the knob. Two women promptly entered.

"Is this the room where they're holding the party?" demanded the taller of the two. "Somebody called the bar and invited us up—some magician, he said it was."

"Called himself the Great Little," volunteered the second girl. "Great Little what, he didn't say."

"Oh Lord!" groaned the spectacled man, and turned to his friends with a hasty whisper. "We can't let word get around about the furniture, I suppose. Might as well invite them in for a minute or they'll get suspicious." He faced the woman again with assumed gaiety. "All right, come on in," he invited. "This is the party, and we're always glad to have company." He indicat-

ed Tubby. "Meet the Great Little himself. The other two are his assistants. As for me, I'm Marmaduke the Magnificent. And that thing over there is a bottle of whiskey. Shall we get acquainted with it?"

Introductions were accomplished and drinks were poured, while the furniture remained mercifully silent. Tall blonde and short blonde gravitated to Hicks and Tubby, and Hicks and Tubby gravitated towards the furniture, soon forgetting their recent experience as the drinks went round.

WITHOUT thinking, Tubby invited the short blonde to sit on the sofa with him. Bill tried to signal, but Tubby didn't notice.

"My," murmured Tubby's girl, patting the mohair. "What an elegantly upholstered sofa."

"You're pretty well upholstered yourself," muttered a muffled voice from somewhere below.

"What was that?" asked the girl.

"Oh, nothing," Tubby gasped. "I think my voice is changing —getting much lower, lately."

"So are your topics of conversation," the girl told him.

Hicks had escorted his blonde to a large chair. When she was seated, he twined his angular body over the side and put his arm around the girl. Suddenly the young lady uttered a shrill squeal.

"Why, what a way to act!"

"Did I do anything wrong?" Hicks asked, innocently.

The girl regarded him with a strange glint in her mascara-laden eyes. "You didn't do anything any good," she confessed. In a moment she squealed again and jumped up from the chair.

"Am I offending you, somehow? Hurting your feelings?"

"You hurt more than that," the girl declared, furiously. She stared down with a puzzled expression. "You couldn't have, though," she mused. "I was watching this time, and you didn't pinch me. Unless—say, it couldn't have been the *chair* now, could it?"

She appealed to Hicks, but the chair supplied its own answer.

"You bet it was, baby," it chuckled. "I haven't had so much fun since the time I caught a Congressman."

The blonde gaped at the laughing furniture with awe in her eyes. Then she turned to Hicks again.

"Pinch me quick to see if I'm dreaming," she begged. Then,

hastily, "No—don't. I've been pinched enough as it is!"

The chair guffawed.

The other blonde rose and approached her companion. "Let's get out of here," she suggested. "This place is creepy."

Her companion shrugged. "It's all a gag," she decided. "Don't forget, these fellows are magicians." And in a lower voice, she quickly added, "Besides, they have plenty of liquor. What can we lose. Let them have their fun."

Hicks and Tubby were by this time sufficiently bottle-weary to accept any situation, and Annabel seemed content to be anywhere as long as Bill was present. As for Bill himself, he was in no condition to object. Each outburst from the furniture had been an excuse for him to refresh himself from the bottle; now he no longer cared if the furniture talked or not. In fact, it was beginning to seem natural.

Since the women didn't appear to be upset by the queer room, the party made up its mind after another drink. "It's a nice place we have," Hicks announced, stubbornly. "We'll stay here, and phooey to the furniture!"

"The same to you, buddy," boomed a voice from the washroom.

"Aw, shut your trap!" rejoined the thin man.

"Let's order more drinks," his blonde girl-friend now suggested. "This looks like a real party."

Bill went to the phone and jiggled the receiver.

"Let go of me!" the mouthpiece scolded.

Bill ignored its chattering as he contacted room service—a brunette switchboard operator he remembered seeing in the lobby.

"Hello," he began, brightly. "This is Room 1013. Send us up a fifth of rye, if you please."

"Make that two fifths, you cheap-skate," the phone cut in.

"What?" asked the switchboard operator.

"I didn't say anything."

"Do you ever?" This from the phone.

"See here," Bill shouted. "One more remark out of you and I'll disconnect your wiring. I'll tangle your batteries."

"What's that?" asked the switchboard girl.

"I'm not talking to you," Bill explained. "I mean, I am talking to you, but—"

"Is there another party on the line?" the girl asked.

"This party is bad enough in itself," the phone put in, prompt-

ly. "At least it's as bad as it could be without you being present, you trull!"

"See here," said the girl at the desk, in repressed fury. "Are you trying to insult me?"

"That's pretty hard to do over the phone, baby," shot back the voice. "However, if you must be insulted, come on up."

This was too much for Bill. With an oath he ripped the offending telephone from the wall and tottered away.



Chapter 4

HIS COMPANIONS weren't making out much better, he discovered. The chairs refused to be sat on. Whenever one of the gathering attempted to lodge in a seat, they were promptly booted from behind and thrown to the floor, where the sofa pelted them with cushions.

Bill tried to sit on the latter with Annabel, and it promptly overturned, grumbling in a loud voice about "lounge lizards!"

Panic gripped the party, and almost by instinct the three men and the three girls huddled together in the center of the room as the furniture laughed and jeered in wooden accents.

Suddenly the table rose and sailed gracefully over their heads. Everyone ducked until it landed against the other wall.

"Maybe it serves us right," Tubby whispered. "I've smashed a lot of furniture in my time—can't blame furniture for wanting to smash me."

"Certainly turning the tables on us," Hicks agreed. "If some of those spiritualist mediums could only see this!"

Bill was not taking matters so calmly. "Let's get out of here," he snapped. He crawled over to the door and tugged at the knob. The door refused to budge.

"Open up!" he shouted.

"Closed for the night," echoed a hollow voice from the key-hole. Bill tugged desperately, but nothing happened.

"Trapped!" he groaned. A vase detached itself from the mantel and winged straight at Tubby's head. The little man ducked just in time, then rose and ran for the bed.

"Golly!" he panted. "I've been driven out of bed by those things before, but this is the first time I've ever been driven into one."

The sailing table now zoomed forward, and Hicks rose from the floor and joined his partner in the bed. "They're ganging up on us," he panted. "They want to kill us!"

Chairs began to scrape across the room menacingly, stiff-legged and strong-armed, and the girls retreated to the safety of the big bed.

Bill put his arms around Annabel protectingly as a pillow struck him in the head. The furniture continued its eery march. Suddenly the lamp flickered and went out, and in the darkness the legs of the chairs scraped in grumbling whispers, the drawers banged squeakily, and the blackness was filled with creaking laughter.

Bill turned and propelled Annabel towards the bed, diving under the sheets with the other four. It was cozy but crowded, and there was little time to consider the proprieties or even the improprieties of the situation.

For as if Bill's arrival were a signal, the entire bed began to rear up on its base, sliding the scrambled sextette to the bottom where they lay in a confused heap.

"Ouch!" competed with "Eeeek!" and was overridden by "Hey!" and "Golly!" and "Help!" but the bed paid no heed. The head now rose, and they tumbled back and forth.

"I'm getting seasick!" Tubby moaned. He rose and tried to race for the door in the darkness. Immediately, the bureau caromed across the room and barred his path. Then the chairs closed in. Inch by inch, Tubby was forced back into the bed.

Deep, mocking howls filled the blackness. "I've taken a lot of punishment in my time," observed the mattress, in a rather stuffy voice. "Yes sir. Bruised springs, broken cords." The bed-frame itself interrupted.

"That's nothing," it complained. "You ought to see my bolster. My poor, cracked bolster!"

"The blazes with you, and your bolster too—whatever that

is!" Bill replied.

"We're talking about punishment," the bed resumed. "No more taking it. I'm going to give a little in return."

So saying, the bed lifted itself about a foot in the air and came down with a rousing thump. What it did to the sextette was definitely unnerving.

"Listen, sister," came Tubby's wail, from the bottom of the tangled, fleshy pile. "Just because we have no chairs, you don't have to use my face for a substitute."

"Oh, then those must be your teeth! I thought for a moment I was sitting on a mouse-trap."

Laboriously, the frightened party disentangled while the bed continued its soliloquy.

"What a life I've led," it whined, in self-pitying tones. "The things I've stood for!"

"We quite understand," Hicks said, hastily. "You needn't go on. How did you and the furniture come alive in the first place?" he asked, trying to change the subject.

"At the Magician's Convention last year," the bed explained. "One of the magicians—guess he was a friend of Dritch—happened to sleep in this room. He talked in his sleep, and while talking he repeated a magic spell of some kind that brought us to life."

"What became of him?" Hicks asked.

"He snored too much," said the bed quite horridly. "So I smothered him under the mattress."

"Quit talking to the furniture," one of the blondes begged. "We want to get out of here!"

"Out, eh?" muttered the familiar voice from below. "Good idea. Hang on everybody—here we go!"

SUDDENLY the bed began to move. Before anyone in the party had realized their predicament the bed slid gracefully over to the door. Now the door obligingly opened allowing the bed and its dazed occupants to proceed out into the hall corridor of the hotel. They rolled along towards the end of the hallway with startling speed.

"Stop it, somebody!" Annabel screamed, clinging to Bill's neck.

"Yes!" Tubby added frantically, "Can't somebody pull the throttle?"

"You're thinking of a runaway train," Hicks shouted above

the clatter of rolling casters. "This is a runaway bed."

"Runaway?" Tubby wailed. "If anybody sees us it'll be a giveaway!"

"I'm getting off right here," said one of the blondes. But she could not. In some mysterious fashion the covers had managed to twine themselves around the various members of the party, who were now held in a tenacious grip.

"These damned things are holding us like the octuples of a tentapus," Hicks muttered.

"You mean the tentacles of a pulipus, don't you?" Annabel corrected, sweetly.

"Never mind the details!" Mr. Hicks shrieked. "Look where we're going now!"

The mad bed had clattered down the hall as far as the staircase. Now, despite the loud protests of its inmates, it began to descend the stairs. Immediately the scrambled sextette slid again to the bottom of the bed where they lay groaning at every bump.

"Oh!" sighed Bill, whose long silence had been due to a pillow that was wedged in his mouth. "If I ever get out of this, I'll be an invalid for life."

"A bed-ridden one," added Tubby. "From now on, I sleep in a hammock, if at all."

"Or a nice cool grave," Hicks babbled. "Oh Lord—here we go again!"

And so they did. Ten flights of stairs were clutteringly covered. Fortunately, nobody else in the hotel seemed aware of the noise; the hour was late and the convention guests probably believed the sounds were caused by their own members coming home. So the ten flights of stairs were painfully descended by the bed and its reluctant passengers, and at last the strange vehicle bounced right out into the lobby.

It was two A. M., but the sound of the tumult served to awaken the everwatchful house detective from his slumbers.

He ambled over as Bill nudged his companions. "Know him?" he whispered.

Hicks shook his head. So did Tubby. Even Annabel tossed her curls. "A new one," she explained. "Hired yesterday, I think. The old house dick quit when he heard the Magician's Convention was coming."

"Then let's get out of here," Bill implored. "Bed, do your stuff! Keep right on moving!"

But the bed, for reasons of its own, stopped right smack in the center of the lobby as the Law approached.

CONSEQUENTLY, all that gentleman witnessed was a lone bed occupying the deserted lobby. Its six occupants immediately pretended slumber. Annabel cradled her face in her hands, Tubby snored, and Hicks hid under the blankets. But the detective was not convinced. He strode up to the bed and poked Hicks in the side.

"What have we here?" he demanded.

"Huh?" Hicks assumed drowsiness. "What do you mean, waking a man out of a good sound sleep?"

"Get up, you," barked the house dick, slapping Hicks sharply on the bottom of his feet.

"Here, now," Hicks objected. "Why not let sleeping dogs lie?"

"You picked a fine place for it, brother," the detective snarled. "Right here in the middle of the lobby."

"A fine place for what?" inquired the smaller of the two blondes.

"Never mind, lady. All I want to know is, why did you decide on the lobby?"

"Just trying to advertise the hotel," Tubby offered, weakly.

"I suppose these ladies constitute a portion of your advertising matter?" the detective wanted to know. "One thing I'd like to find out before I run you all in. Just how did you get the bed all the way down those stairs?"

"This I can't answer," Tubby answered. "But I'd like to give it a good kick in the slats."

"We're not responsible," the larger blonde added. "We just rode down."

"Well, all out—this is the end of the line." The detective gestured at them with his cigar. "Rise and shine."

"We can't," said Annabel, in a small voice.

"You mean you won't?" asked the house dick, menacingly.

"No, we can't. We're—we're not dressed for the lobby." She attempted a blush.

"Get up anyway."

"No," Tubby broke in, "I have my alarm set for seven. I need my rest."

"Out!" the detective insisted.

"We paid for this bed and we're staying in it," Hicks replied. "How do you like that?"

"How do you like this?" countered the detective drawing a nasty-looking black revolver. "I'll give you just ten seconds."

"But we're not dressed either," Bill protested, stoutly defending Annabel's story.

"You mean to tell me all six of you are—?" The man could go no further.

"All in one bed too!"

"We're Scotch, mister," Annabel explained.

"Listen," said the detective, despairingly. "Any more of this talk will drive me screwy. I want you all to wrap some blankets around you and come into the office. There's an awful lot of funny business going on around here."

"But we can't come," Bill said, deciding to tell the truth. "The bed won't let us go."

The detective groaned and Bill subsided.

"You see, sir." Tubby went on, "It seems like we made our bed and now we have to lie in it."

"I'll call the manager!" yelled the detective.

"But—" Bill blurted out, "*I am the manager!*"

THAT WAS too much for the house dick. Gibbering insanely, he discharged his gun at the bedsheets, which immediately burst into flame. The bed, angered at this sudden attack, began to roll after the detective. With a scream of horror, the poor man fled before the ill-tempered bed's charge, as the flaming sheets parted to release the six bed-partners.

Bill, completely unnerved, headed for the elevators. The last thing he saw was a backward vision of the bed knocking down the detective and jumping frantically around on his prostrate form.

Reaching the open, empty elevator, Bill slammed the door shut and glided upwards. He meant to stop at the second floor, but through the glass he saw that the halls were now crowded by pajama-clad people, all aroused by the revolver shots and the general bedlam over the bed that took it on the lam.

Bill didn't care to face people for a long, long time to come. For this reason he sped the dark elevator up to the twelfth and topmost floor. Here was a stairway corridor that led up to the roof garden. Bill opened the elevator door and stepped out.

"Now for a little air," he whispered.

"Just what I needed," said a musical voice from behind him.

Bill whirled suddenly, half-expecting to see the elevator stool rising to beat his head in.

Instead he encountered Annabel.

"How did you get here?" he demanded.

"I was here all the time," said the girl demurely. "But you didn't even bother to look around. If you had, we might have taken more time to get up here."

"What?"

"Not very bright tonight, are we?" the girl jeered. "Very well, let's stroll around the roof."

Bill agreed. It was the worst thing he possibly could have done under the circumstances. These circumstances included the deserted roof-garden, the wicker sofa, the night breeze, and the moon.

The garden looked down on the elfin lights of a great city—a city of enchantment when viewed from this height. The wicker sofa invited watchers to sit down, whereupon the night breeze, cooling their cheeks, caused them to gaze upwards. And then, of course, they could not help but notice the moon.

It floated serenely in the sky, a white witch among ghostly clouds. Moonbeams tangled in Annabel's hair, melted into Annabel's eyes.

Bill gazed at her silently, and she gave him back a mocking smile. Any other man, under similar circumstances, would have embraced his opportunity—that is to say, Annabel. But Bill's innocent reaction made her feel strangely tender. This, the girl did her hardboiled best to disguise.

"You great big chivalrous square!" She moved closer to him and Bill moved away. "What's the matter—am I really so repulsive?"

"Of course not," Bill confessed. "I can't trust myself when I get near you."

"You sound like the second act of a lousy play," she told him. And moved still closer.

"I wonder what's become of the boys," Bill quavered. "Perhaps we'd better go downstairs."

"We will," Annabel promised, a gleam in her violet eyes. "We will, eventually."

And eventually, they did



Chapter 5

WHEN Bill Dawson awoke in his own room some hours later he was not, strictly speaking, a new man. But he was not an old man, either.

Whatever had happened to him in his peculiar nightmare, it had all been for the best, he decided, as he dressed and faced the morning. He felt refreshed, alert, confident, ready to face New York and his vacation with renewed zest. The vividness of his weird dream seemed to add to his well-being this morning.

Actually, as he remembered it, the mental images of Mr. Marmaduke Hicks and Tubby, were more vivid than those of the people he had known back at the furniture factory. He could recall the details of their dress with greater clarity, the intonations of their voices, the peculiarities of their expressions. He fancied he could almost smell their breath.

Bill remembered, too, that he had been quite drunk in this nightmare, and happily so. He had behaved in an uncouth, uncivilized way, and found it all surprisingly attractive. He recalled the exuberant antics of his dream companions. And he remembered Annabel.

Annabel! A vision of her white slimness, honeyed hair and

violent violet eyes crossed his mind. A dangerous girl, but a delectable one. What a dream *that* had been, he mused. But now, to face reality—

Bill was just ready to go down for breakfast when the phone rang. He picked it up. A male voice came across the wire.

"Hello, is this the manager?"

"No. This is Mr. Dawson's room."

"That's who I'm looking for. Mr. Dawson, the new manager."

"New—manager?"

"Yeah. Aren't you the gent what won the hotel last night in a crap game?"

Bill almost dropped the phone.

Then it *wasn't* a dream. It was *real!*

That meant Annabel was real. And Hicks, and Tubby—
The door opened. Hicks and Tubby marched in.

Bill's grasp on the phone wavered. "What do you want?" he murmured.

"This is Janus," said the voice on the phone. "I'm the doorman. And if you're the new manager, I figure you'd wanna know that—"

"Yes, I'm the new manager, I guess," Bill admitted, more to himself than to the doorman. "What was it you wanted me to know?"

"Only that somebody just brought a wolf into the hotel."

"A wolf?"

"Yeah. One of them magicians, I guess. So what do I do?"

"I'll be right down," Bill promised.

He hung up hastily and turned to face Marmaduke Hicks and Tubby Telbertson. Both the tall and the short gentlemen were attired in spotless morning clothes; black tailcoats and grey, striped trousers.

"How do we look?" Tubby piped. "Thought we'd better get into these outfits and pretend to be assistant managers or something."

"Wonderful," Bill agreed. "But I thought you two were broke. Where'd you get the wardrobe?"

"There was a mortician's convention here last month," Hicks explained. "Things were pretty dead, but we managed to get hold of these undertaker's suits."

"Well, change into some zookeeper's costume," Bill sighed. "We've got a wolf in the lobby."

"I told you these magicians played rough," Tubby said, not at all perturbed. "Let's go see about this."

"Annabel's downstairs," Hicks added, as they moved to the door. "Just drank breakfast with her. She told us you hit the roof last night."

"What happened to you?" Bill changed the subject, hastily.

"Oh, we were around. Which reminds me, we have a date to meet Mrs. Pratt and Susan Foster at the Convention Meeting this noon."

"Who are they?" Bill asked, as they entered the elevator.

"Our little playmates of last night. The blondes," Hicks explained. "Mrs. Pratt's ex-husband is President of International Legerdemainiacs. That's the official name of the Convention, you know. She doesn't like him, but she came here hoping some other magician might give her a job. She used to be Pratt's assistant in the magic act—he worked under the name of Houdonit, you know—and she claims he did a lot of prestidigitation with her."

"You seem to have found out a lot," Bill observed.

"Oh, we did," Tubby assured him. "Susan Foster wants to get in a magic act, too. She used to be in burlesque, and she has a wonderful idea for a strip-tease. After she removes her clothing she vanishes completely."

THE PARTY emerged from the elevator on the lobby floor.

The first person Bill saw was Annabel. She flew into his arms, and if Bill had any doubts as to her reality, they were quickly and firmly dispelled. Bill lost himself in a long kiss, but he was called into awareness by a terrible thing.

The thing was a sound. A howling.

"The wolf!" Tubby exclaimed. Nor was he alone. An excited knot of guests clustered along the lobby wall, out of harm's way. Over at the registration desk stood two men—and the wolf.

Bill stared at the great shaggy beast, then turned his attention to its companions. They were equally strange and equally dismaying. One of them was tall and gaunt, a cadaverous figure muffled in a long black cloak. The other was a walking beard.

Never in his life had Bill seen such a beard. It was shaggier than the wolf; a huge white Fuller Brush of a beard that swept the floor. Somewhere behind the beard a face must have been concealed, because a red nose protruded through it about

four feet from the floor. Bill judged the beard's wearer must be a small man. How he was attired could not be told. He might have gone nude if he chose—for no one could appear naked with that beard.

Wolf, cloak and beard were now confronting the desk clerk, and an argument seemed to be in progress.

"I'm sorry," the desk clerk was saying. "I can't register a wolf."

"You don't need to register him," came a voice from behind the beard. "This is not a dog show."

"We do not permit animals, sir. Everyone who stays here must be registered."

"But it's for the Convention," the beard argued. "I've told you a hundred times."

"Wolves do not belong at Conventions," was the answer. "I am sure the rest of the magicians would not approve. Think of publicity—the press will be here, and we'll even have a broadcast over the radio tonight. We can't afford to have a wolf in the hotel—supposed he howled when we went on the air? Wolves and radio don't mix."

"On the contrary," persisted the beard. "This wolf may come in handy on the radio. We could use his paws for station identification."

"Sorry, but I cannot give a room to the wolf," the desk clerk snapped.

"Let me speak to the manager!" It was the cloak who spoke now.

"Here I go," Bill muttered removing Annabel's arms from his shoulders.

"No, Bill—keep away!" warned the girl. "That wolf looks dangerous. Remember what my uncle said about this Convention. Lots of queer things happen. Be careful!"

"I'm the manager," he said. "I've got to take care of these problems or the hotel will get a bad name."

He strode resolutely towards the desk.

"Manager!" yelled the cloaked man. "We want the manager!"

"That's me," Bill announced. Cloak, beard and wolf turned and stared at him. The wolf made a low noise in its throat and opened a big red mouth.

Bill quickly dodged to one side and entered the desk clerk's cage. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"These gentlemen have just registered here, and they insist

we give a room to the wolf," the clerk explained. "It's the Convention, of course."

"I see," Bill glanced at the ledger and noted the names of the cloak and beard.

"You are Pseudo W. Nym?"

The cloak bowed, and the long white face creased into a smile.

"That's my stage name, of course," explained the cloak. "My real name is Onymous. N. Onymous, to be exact."

"Greek?"

"From Transylvania. Triladelphia, Transylvania."

Bill noted the second name on the ledger—the beard's—and his heart sank.

"Mr. L. Dritch?"

"That is correct." The beard bowed.

"Dritch. Weren't you here last year?"

"That is correct," said the beard. "I made a preliminary investigation of the premises. My findings were satisfactory, so this year—as you can see—I have returned with my friends."

"Very decent of you, I'm sure," Bill quavered eyeing the gigantic wolf.

"More of them will be arriving this evening," Mr. L. Dritch purred, through the beard. "Some of my friends do not—er—care to be seen in daylight."

"This I can understand."

"What's that?"

"I mean—it will be nice to have them here. Are they all magicians?"

"Definitely, my dear sir. Thaumaturgists, necromancers, adepts, cabalists, geotist and evocators. To say nothing of mages and wizards and other practitioners of the mantic arts. This will be, unless I greatly err, a real Convention." A chuckle filtered through the beard—a chuckle filled with malice and dandruff.

"We'll try to make you feel at home," Bill promised, wondering whether it would be best to keep the mysterious Mr. Dritch happy until he thought of a way to get rid of him.

"Anything you want, just ask me."

"I will do so," Mr. Dritch nodded. "Perhaps you could begin by finding me some raw meat."

"Raw meat?"

"For the wolf, here. He's hungry."

"Never mind that," the cloaked Mr. Nym interrupted. "Are

there any children around?"

Bill turned pale.

"He's very fond of children," Dritch explained.

"Raw children, that is," added the cloak.



Chapter 6

BILL DECIDED that pleasing these peculiar guests was out of the question.

"Now see here," he said. "One thing you simply must understand. We can't have a wolf staying at this hotel."

The beard shrugged, and Mr. Dritch shrugged with it. "But that is just what I've been trying to tell this stupid room clerk," he said. "This isn't an ordinary wolf."

"He's not?" Bill glanced down at the great slavering beast as it sniffed hungrily at his leg.

"Certainly not. He's really a were-wolf!"

"A were—but that's impossible, there are no such things!" Bill turned and appealed to the group loitering fearfully in the lobby. "You heard what he said, folks. Tell him there are no such things as werewolves."

The group was silent, but every eye stared glassily at the shaggy creature at Bill's side.

"You see," Bill laughed, weakly. "Nobody believes in a silly superstition like werewolves any more."

The wolf opened red jaws.

"All right," said the wolf. "Have it your own way, then,

smarty. So I'm a werewolf. *Boo!*"

"Good heavens!" Bill peered at the lobby spectators. "Did you hear what I heard?"

Apparently they had, because there wasn't anybody in the lobby any more.

"Now do we get that room?" purred Mr. L. Dritch, dusting the carpet with his long white beard.

"Give them the room," Bill sighed. "Give them anything they want, just so they get that—monster—out of sight."

"Fine," said the cloak. "I want to go up to my room right away and change for the Convention meeting. It must be started in the ballroom by now."

"I want to change, too," remarked the werewolf.

"Not in the lobby," Mr. Dritch warned.

The desk clerk extended a pen with a trembling hand. The wolf grasped it between its teeth and laboriously scratched a signature in the register.

"Mr. W. Wolf" it wrote.

Sighing, the room clerk extended keys to the trio and they marched away. Nobody offered to carry their baggage, and Bill, feeling that the hotel must extend some courtesy even to such unusual guests, tagged along to the elevator.

"What about your luggage?" he inquired.

The man in the cloak turned and smiled. "Never mind," he said. "Two men will bring it up later."

"Two men?"

"Well, you can't expect one man to carry such a load alone," the cloak explained. "Ordinarily it takes six, three to a side. Plus the honorary pallbearers, that is."

Bill didn't care to ask any more questions. He went for the corridor, to find his new assistants and Annabel. The last he saw of Mr. Dritch, Mr. Nym and Mr. W. Wolf was when they entered the elevator. The hairy trio looked as if they belonged at a Barber's Convention, and Bill heartily wished that's where they'd gone.

"Looks like trouble ahead," he sighed.

"Right," said Mr. Hicks, grabbing him at the hall door and yanking him through. "Come on into the ballroom. The Convention's just started, and all hell is busting loose!"

THE SEVENTH Annual Convention of the International Legerdemainiacs at the Hotel Flopmoor, New York, opened

promptly in the Grand Ballroom at 10 A. M. the morning of October 30th.

The magicians, some two hundred in all, including professional stage and nightclub performers and a large group of skilled amateurs and hobbyists, were welcomed to the two-day session by Oswald Pratt, better known to the public as "Houd-unit".

He promised them a business meeting in the afternoon and an election of officers that night; a free tour of the city next morning, and a Grand Hallowe'en Ball for the following evening to wind up the Convention.

But this morning's session, said Mr. Pratt, was to be devoted to introducing a number of prominent and internationally famous practitioners of illusion and deception, who would speak on new tricks and variations of old ones.

"The first distinguished guest I wish to present," said Mr. Pratt, peering down from the stage at the audience of bearded, goateed and mustached stage magicians who sat stiffly in the evening clothes and turbans usually associated with their deceptive calling, "is that celebrated mentalist, star of stage, screen, radio and television—none other than the famous Dumbinger—who has arranged to give us a demonstration of his mind-reading powers and his remarkable feats of memory. As you all know," Mr. Pratt informed his hearers, "Dumbinger is the man who never misses, the man whose mental concentration is the marvel of the world today. It is a pleasure and a privilege to present the one and only Dumbinger—in person!"

There was loud applause. A spotlight flashed on the stage, Mr. Pratt bowed and gestured, and—

Nothing happened.

Nobody appeared. Mr. Pratt peered up at the platform as the crowd stamped and whistled. He walked back on the stage. "Mr. Dumbinger!" he called.

A pimply-faced bellboy suddenly raced down the aisle and whispered up at the stage. Mr. Pratt nodded and faced the audience. He held up his hands for silence.

"I'm sorry," he said. "There has been an error. It seems Mr. Dumbinger forgot his appointment this morning. As a matter of fact, he has registered at the wrong hotel. He just phoned and said he will be down later as soon as he can find his trousers, which he seems to have mislaid."

Jeers and hoots from the magicians. Mr. Pratt, a large, red-



faced man, became if anything larger and more red-faced. "In his absence," he said, "I will carry on myself. Since this morning session is devoted to illusions, I'll show you how I perform one of my own. It's a variation of that famous old standby—sawing a woman in half."

Pratt stared into the darkness of the hall. "I have my own equipment here," he said. "But I need a volunteer. I'm wondering if my former wife happens to be present. She is familiar with the trick and may be kind enough to assist me."

"Here I am, Oswald," called the tall blonde who had entered Tubby's life the night before. "I'll be right up."

She took the stage, and there was more whistling as she bowed to the onlookers. Pratt rushed to the wings and presently returned, wheeling a huge table and a circular saw attached to an electrical turbine.

"I thought you'd be here, Mabel," he whispered to his ex-wife. "And I hope you're behaving yourself. Remember our agreement—if I ever catch you with another man, I cut off your alimony."

"You can saw me in half," retorted the blonde, "But if you cut off my alimony you'll be sorry."

BOOTH NOW presented smiling faces to the audience, and the stunt began. Mrs. Pratt lay down on the table. Pratt went into his patter routine. He placed a box over the blonde's body and then set his electric saw above her midriff. He turned on the current. Spotlights flashed on the gleaming circle of steel as the motor hummed and the saw rasped. It bit into the board, cut through the wood, sliced through the blonde's body, sliced through the table beneath. There was a hiss and a roar.

Pratt moved the two halves of the table apart, showing Mrs. Pratt's head and bust separated from her legs and torso. There was loud applause.

Presently he covered the two halves with a cloth, waved a small wand, and caused a cloud of smoke to cover the entire table. When the cloud wafted away he lifted the cloth and Mrs. Pratt jumped down from the table, smiling and exhibiting a whole body once again.

There was louder and prolonged applause.

And at this moment a voice in the audience cried, "Fake!"

"Fake?" gasped Mr. Pratt.

"Fake!" yelled the voice. "A great big fake!"

At this juncture, Hicks had noticed the uproar and dragged Bill down the hall towards the ballroom. As he entered it with Annabel and Tubby tagging along, the cries of "Fake!" grew louder and more furious. The entire meeting was in a tumult.

"Who calls me a fake?" Pratt demanded staring into the darkness and trying to locate the voice.

"I do!"

"And who, pray tell, are you?"

"Archie!" yelled the voice. "Archie the Archfiend!"

"Never heard of you," Pratt snapped. "Who books you?"

"Nobody. I'm on my own."

"Where'd you appear last?"

"I never perform in public," Archie yelled back. "People don't appreciate my type of magic."

Mr. Pratt forced a laugh. "You see, gentlemen?" he asked the crowd. "Here is a rank amateur, who has never even appeared on the stage, challenging my illusion. I suppose you object to my timing?"

"I object to the whole thing," Archie called up. "It's all a fake. That big saw and that box and black cloth—all a lot of hooey, that's what it is. You can't saw a woman in half and make it look real."

"Perhaps you can do better?" challenged Mr. Pratt, in a fine red rage that went nicely with his white gardenia.

"Sure I can. Matter of fact, I will."

The small figure came down the aisle and clambered up to the stage. Bill and his companions saw a little portly man with a snub nose who looked more like a burlesque comic than a magician. He peered tauntingly up at the huge Mr. Pratt.

"Well, here I am," he said. "Ready to go. Of course, I didn't bring a girl with me, you know."

"Excuses," snorted Pratt. "I thought so! Cheap excuses! Well, you won't get out of this so easily. We can get you an assistant from the crowd, can't we?"

"You mean some girl would be willing for me to saw her?" asked Archie incredulously.

"Why not? How about my ex-wife, here?"

But Mrs. Pratt shook her head. Sorry. Once is enough. Besides, I'm afraid of this character. He looks like a schizophrenic to me."

"Like a what?" demanded Archie, red hair bristling.

"Schizophrenic," repeated Mrs. Pratt, "You know—split per-

sonality."

"Lay on the table and I'll split your personality for you," Archie offered. But the tall blonde moved away. "You see?" said Archie. "I can't do it without a volunteer."

"I'll take a chance." A feminine voice rose from the darkness of the hall.

A MOMENT later the girl appeared—a slim, blackhaired young woman clad in slacks. "I ain't a professional," she explained, "but I've always wanted a chance to go on the stage on account of my friends all say I'm lousy with talent." She snapped her gum roguishly at Mr. Pratt.

"Will she do?" Pratt demanded of Archie.

"Why not? No great loss," Archie rubbed his hands. "Now for the equipment."

"Want to use my table and box and saw?"

"No. Who needs all that crud?" Archie shrugged. "That's just what I mean about fakes. I want to show you all how to really do a saw routine. All I need is a chair and a saw. A regular hand saw."

"Hand saw?"

A bellhop was fetched and dispatched to bring back a saw from the basement. Archie strutted before the crowd.

"You never saw an act like this before," he told them. "This will give you a real thrill. I learned my magic the hard way—no props for me, no siree! Here, stretch out, honey, and relax while I cut up."

The girl bent over a low chair, resting her trunk against the seat.

"This is awfully nice of you to help," Archie crooned at her. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Not if it helps me professionally," the girl assured him. "It—it won't hurt will it?"

"Of course not. I told you I'm a real magician. So I'll make sure you don't feel a thing."

The bellboy returned with a handsaw—a gleaming, wicked little thing. Archie hefted it. "Used to play one like this back on the farm," he mused. "That was before I got on the Arthur Godfrey Amateur Show."

"Never mind the autobiography," snarled Pratt. "You made some dirty remarks about my trick. You promised to show us how you saw a woman in half. Now get going, and let the chips

fall where they may."

"Hips," corrected Archie the Archfiend, sweetly. "All right, here we go."

He picked up the saw and poised over the young lady's midriff.

"Hey, wait!" Pratt exclaimed. "No cloth? No patter to the audience? No misdirection or sleight of hand?"

"Naw!" Archie grunted. "That's the beauty part of my trick. I just saw her, see? See-saw. Right out in front of everybody. Like—this."

And he took the saw and began to saw the girl in half.

There was no noise, no smoke, no black cloths fluttering, no music, no drama. Just a stout little man sawing a shapely brunette across the middle with a plain carpenter's handsaw. The saw sliced into her, the little man worked away, and pretty soon the saw came out the other side.

"Hey!" yelled the girl. "I'm chilly!"

"Fresh air blowing on yer stomach," Archie explained. "You're open at the middle now, see? In two pieces."

"But it didn't hurt—it's a trick," the girl persisted.

"Sure, that's the trick, doing it so it doesn't hurt, and so you're still alive. But you're in two pieces, all right."

The audience rose.

It was true. The girl was in two pieces, all right or all wrong. One piece consisted of head, bust and arms. The other piece was legs and torso.

"There you are," called Archie the Archfiend. "That's what I call really sawing a woman in half."

"Good Lord!" yelled Pratt. "He—he did it! I can see she's been bifurcated."

"Watch yer language, buddy," cautioned Archie.

"You—you mean I'm really cut in two?" wailed the brunette. "Actually?"

"Actually."

"But I didn't know—and how will this help me professionally—ooh, it's true!" gasped the girl, looking down and seeing her legs wiggling on the floor as her torso moved independently of her own volition.

SCREAMS rose from the audience. Annabel grasped Bill's arm tightly. "See what I mean about magicians?" she whispered.

"Do something!" yelled Mr. Pratt at Archie, who stood smiling and pointing at the divided girl.

"What more do you want?" asked Archie. "I told you what I'd do and I didn't."

"Put me back together, quick!" gasped the girl.

"Yes—hurry up and put her back together!" Pratt moaned.

"Sorry. That's not part of the trick," Archie smiled. "I never said I would put her together again. Matter of fact, I don't know how to. Never got any instructions, and like I say, this is the first time I really tried to saw a woman in half."

"But I can't stay like this," the girl screeched.

"Why not? You're alive, and nothing hurts you, does it? Why beef?"

"Oooh!" The girl tried to sit up but failed since she no longer had anything to sit up with, let alone on. "Why, you sawed-off little squirt—"

"Look who's calling me sawed-off!" chuckled Archie.

"Stop him!" yelled Pratt, as the little man walked away.

"Yes—stop him!" the girl echoed.

The audience still wasn't quite sure if the whole thing was a gag or not. Now they learned the ghastly truth. For as Archie walked away, the girl followed him.

To be exact, the legs followed him. The legs and torso got up from the chair and began to chase him through the hall.

The sight of the trunkless torso moving through the darkness was a little too much for the magicians at large. They began to run, too. So did Bill and Annabel and Hicks and Tubby.

As for Mr. Pratt, he stood on the stage and stared at the head and arms of the sawed-up girl.

"I can't make heads nor tails out of all this," Pratt sighed.

"Do something!" she yelled.

"Yeah," Pratt muttered, to himself. "I guess I'd better." Picking up the gavel, he banged lustily and yelled, "Meeting is adjourned."

But nobody heard him. The darkened hall was completely empty. Pratt's last glimpse of the audience consisted of a vision of Archie the Archfiend, struggling to worm his way through the crowd at the rear exit, while the animated torso of a woman kicked him in the pants.

"NOW WHAT do we do?" Bill groaned, as Annabel dragged him along the corridor.

"Relax," the girl advised, panting and lashing out at the crowd. "Be like me," she told him punching one of the fleeing magicians in the ribs, "Keep calm and cool."

"Yes," Hicks shouted above the din, as he ripped the coat off the man ahead of him, "Don't get excited!"

Tubby, who was running interference, grunted in assent as they moved out into the lobby.

"But this will ruin the hotel's reputation," Bill objected. "We'll lose all our business."

"Take it easy. In a couple of hours everybody will have forgotten about the whole thing. The story will be twisted around until everyone thinks it was all a gag. These magicians are a wild bunch anyway. Look—they're not checking out. They're just heading for the bar to drown their memories."

The girl spoke truly. Bill could see the guests crowding into the cocktail lounge.

"We'll have to make plans, though," he warned. "Remember those awful creatures who checked in this morning with Mr. Dritch? Wait until they get loose—"

"We'll think about that problem later," Hicks promised. "When we're equipped to handle it."

"He means when we're drunk," Tubby supplied, unhelpfully. They halted before the elevators and Bill peered around, trying to locate Archie the Archfiend and his pursuer. But the little redheaded sorcerer and his unusual better half were nowhere to be seen.

"Time to go," Hicks remarked, glancing at his watch. "We have a date for lunch with Mrs. Pratt and Susan Foster, remember? Are you two joining us?"

"Not at the moment," Bill sighed. "I couldn't stand the thought of eating lunch while the bottom half of a woman is running loose in this hotel."

"That sounds a little odd, but I guess I get what you mean," Annabel conceded. "You and I will stay here, then. See you boys later."

She waved farewell to Hicks and Tubby as the twosome took their leave, and the elevator went up.

"Come on," Bill said, grabbing Annabel's arm. "I've got work to do."

"What sort of work?"

"Well, I'm the manager. I'd better find out what this is all about." He led Annabel to the offices behind the registration

desk. There he introduced himself to the hotel steward, the comptroller, the assistant manager, a Mr. Al Gonquin, and several other dignitaries who had all been informed of Bill's new job by Manager Bipple before he left.

Bill said as little as possible. He asked polite questions about how things were going, indicated his approval of arrangements for the day, and rejoiced in the knowledge that news of the terrible scene in the ballroom had not yet come to their attention.

"Why, running a hotel seems to be easy," Bill confided to the girl as they left. "All you need is a lot of guests and some beds."

"A great theory," Annabel agreed. "I'm all for it, myself. Shall we go upstairs and relax a bit?"

"Not yet." Bill was grimly determined. "I've got to solve this business about the sawed-up woman. Go to the desk and ask Al Gonquin to call a meeting over in the service room. I want to speak to all the bellboys, and also to the house detective."

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Chapter 7

TEN MINUTES later a dozen bellboys and the house detective faced Manager Bill Dawson in the small room off the lobby. The house dick was properly apologetic for events of the previous evening.

"I didn't know you was the manager," he explained, "or else I wouldn't have paid no attention how many people you had in bed with you." The bellboys exchanged wondering smirks at this.

"Thank you," said Bill, with a pained smile. "Let's consider the incident closed. I trust it will not happen again."

"Oh that's all right," the house dick beamed. "You can do it again tonight if you like. Round up a whole bunch and climb into bed right in the lobby if you like, it's OK with—"

"Kindly shut your fat mouth," Bill snapped. "Now, men, let's get down to business. I have called this meeting for a very serious reason. The good name and reputation of the Flopmoor is at stake. No guest should be informed of what I have to say here, and it will be your duty to conceal the facts wherever possible."

"You can trust us, boss," said the head bellhop.

"Good. Briefly, I want to warn you all about a certain woman, or rather, a certain portion of a certain woman. Her bottom half is running around loose."

"What?"

"I mean—oh, how can I explain it? I want you all to conceal the bottom half of this woman. Don't let it get out whatever you do."

"Please, sir," said one of the bellboys "I don't quite understand. Do you want us to find this loose woman for you and bring her here?"

"No. Just the bottom half is what interests me—I mean, it's chasing after the guests and I want it to stop."

"What's its name?" asked the house detective. "I don't recall us registering half a woman before."

"We didn't," Bill gulped, desperately. "She was all right when she came in. It's just that somebody cut her in two in the ballroom recently—"

"Then it's murder!" shouted the detective, "I'll call police—homicide—we'll tail the guy that cut her—"

"He's already being tailed," Bill explained. "By her lower limbs. Can't you understand? This bottom half isn't dead, it's very much alive, and—oh, Annabel, help me!"

Annabel patted the stricken man on the shoulder and took over. In a few words she explained the unusual situation to the bellhops and the detective. They promised faithfully to keep on the lookout for the animated torso and try to bring it back to the upper portion of the woman in the ballroom "Don't let that get away, either," Annabel warned. "You'd better split up; some of you look for one section, some for the other."

Then Annabel led Bill away, as the bellhops tossed coins, heads or tails, to determine which half they would look for.

"You need a drink after all this," she suggested. "And some rest. Let's go up to your room and take things easy for a while."

"All right," Bill agreed. "But we can't stop work now. I want to be prepared for those magicians—no telling what Mr. Dritch will be up to. If he animated furniture last year, Lord knows what to expect now."

The lobby was quiet once more. Bill stopped at the desk to order sandwiches and a bottle of rye sent up to his room, and then escorted Annabel to the elevator.

"Wonder what Hicks and Tubby are doing?" she mused, as they ascended. She was not long in finding out.

The elevator came to rest on the second floor and two men entered, casting nervous glances over their shoulders. Both of them wore violent bathrobes and still more violent frowns. The elder of the two, disregarding Bill and Annabel completely grumbled to his companion in low tones.

"There I lay," he muttered, "when all of a sudden the door opens and these two women come running in like all hell was at their heels. Into the washroom they go and turn on the showers, just like that."

"You don't say!" commented his companion.

"I do say. So I yelled through the door and asked them what they thought they were doing, 'We're taking a bath' one of them yells back. So I asked 'Why?' and she says 'Because we're drunk, that's why and we want to sober up fast so we can drink some more. And don't come in, because the tub is crowded and besides, we're only half-dressed.' Then they started to laugh and I got out of there."

"Lucky I came along in the hall," remarked the second man. "What are you going to do about it all?"

"I'm going to find the manager and complain about those half-dressed women."

"That's going to sound funny complaining about half-dressed women, I mean," mused the second man.

"Well, I'll make the manager find them and throw them out, whoever they are."

"How will you recognize them if they're only half-dressed?" his friend pondered. "I mean, they all sort of look alike that way, don't they?"

"Don't tell me there's any more of them in this hotel," said the first man, hastily. "I came here for a rest. And there's darn little rest with those half-dressed women around."

"Or any half-dressed women," his companion added thoughtfully.

BILL SHRANK back in the corner and hid his face. The elevator paused on the fourth floor and allowed another passenger to enter—a scantily-clad man who was attired quite simply in a small bath towel. He looked bewildered and apologetic as he addressed the occupants of the car.

"Have you noticed any half-dressed women running around?" he inquired.

"Do you want a half-dressed woman?" asked Annabel, cur-

iously.

"Gawd no, lady—I've had my fill of them!" groaned the small man.

"Frank, aren't you?" Annabel replied. "You and your half-dressed women?"

"Quit saying that word, lady," begged the man. "Half-dressed women have ruined my day. And that's not the worst."

The elevator-boy was so engrossed in this story that he failed to start the car. The little man in the bath towel button-holed him and continued his tale of woe. "I came into my room a little while ago and there they were, two women lying right on my bed, fast asleep."

"They're pretty fast awake, too," Annabel offered. But the little man ignored her. "So I went over to wake them up and all of a sudden I stumbled on something lying on the floor. I was standing on a man's stomach."

"Go on," said Bill, softly, although he was beginning to realize who the man was talking about.

"By this time I was a little confused, I guess. Because I kicked this man quite hard in the face. He slid under the bed, but believe it or not as soon as he disappeared another man stuck his head out from down there and began to curse me. By this time the women woke up and the other man crawled out and all four of them began chasing me around the room, drunk as coots.

"I tried to talk to the tall man, the one who wore glasses—and he said they were unfrocked members of the Ku Klux Klan and if I would undress they would make me Supreme Kleagle. Then I could join them in the big hunt.

"So I asked what they were hunting for, only half-dressed like that, and what do you think they told me?"

"What?" asked Annabel.

"They said they were looking for half a woman. Half a woman, mind you—and just the bottom half at that. Said she, or it, was running loose somewhere in the hotel and they had to find her. Told me to be on the lookout for a pair of green slacks with nothing up above.

"And all the time they were telling me this, they kept pulling off my clothes—said they were going to use me for a decoy for this half-whatzis.

"So I told them they were crazy, and drunk, and to get out of my room. I even went over to the door and opened it. And then—".

The little man gulped and shuddered. He nearly dropped the bathtowel in his agitation.

"So help me, when I opened the door, in marched half a woman! A pair of green slacks and nothing else. Just a torso—but even more so, if you know what I mean!"

"They all jumped on her, or it, and it tried to kick, but they wrapped it up in a sheet, and I saw my chance and ran for the elevator. And here I am."

"And here we are," said Annabel, as the elevator stopped on their floor. She turned to the elevator operator. "Boy, take these gentlemen downstairs and see that valet service provides them with fresh wardrobes. Then send them all into the bar for some refreshment. On the house, of course, compliments of the management. We'll see that the rooms are cleaned up for them again."

"Thanks, lady," said the little man. "Are you the manager?"

"He is," Annabel indicated Bill. "And those drunks are just relatives. You know how it is with relatives—got to put up with them, can't kick them out. I trust you'll pardon the whole affair."

"All right with me," agreed the big man in the bathrobe. "I'd pardon anything for a drink right now." He peered at Bill. "So they're your relatives, eh?" he mused. "Well, if I may ask just one question—what relation are you to that half of a woman?"

"Oh, she's my half-sister," Bill replied.

"Of course, now I get it," the man said as they exited. A slow look of doubt crept over his face. "But wait—" he cried.

Bill and Annabel didn't wait. They hastened to his room.

"I hope they sent up that bottle," he sighed. "I need a drink right now more than those men. What a panic this turned out to be—and imagine me wanting a drink!"

"Do you good," Annabel said.

IT DID. The bottle and sandwiches waited, but not for long. Bill and the girl sat down and ate. And drank. And drank some more. It was getting on towards afternoon, and Bill felt the need of relaxation. Once more life had resumed its unreal quality; things were happening much too fast, and there seemed to be no solution save an alcoholic one. One drink led to another.

Annabel sat down on the edge of Bill's chair and stroked his hair as he poured into the glasses.

"It may be a little strange to you, all this excitement, but I hope you're having fun," she murmured.

"Yes, I am, heaven help me!" Bill sighed. He was having a good time, and it bothered him. Bill, like most sedentary souls, had always looked on pleasure as something that one watched, not as something one did. One was offered the pleasure of music, reading, seeing entertainment—but the idea of participation was something new. And yet here he was, plunged into a whirl of pleasurable events. It was too much to cope with, so he took refuge in drink. The liquor warmed and worked in him.

"So much has happened," he told the girl. "Up to a few days ago all this was strange to me. Believe it or not, in the town I come from I'd never stayed out all night. I'd never had anything to drink but a glass or two of beer. And I'd never—well, I mean—"

"You'd never met a girl like me," Annabel supplied, helpfully. "Sorry now?"

"How can you say that?" Bill took another drink, a big one. He felt very flushed and feverish, but pleasantly so. "You're wonderful, Annabel. You and Hicks and Tubby—I suppose I shouldn't approve of the things you say and the things you do, but I like it. Every bit of it. Take this drinking, now. You know, I'm almost getting drunk."

"Almost?" Annabel giggled. "I'd say you were quite drunk, pet. Quite, quite drunk."

Bill scowled defiantly. "Wrong," he said. "Changed my mind. I'm all right."

"How could you tell? Annabel teased.

"Well, for instance—if I started to see funny animals. Like, maybe penguins. If I saw a penguin walk into this room I'd be drunk."

"Penguins don't walk," Annabel said. "They waddle."

"So does my Aunt Minnie," Bill answered. "And she's no penguin."

"My Uncle George is a Moose," Annabel offered.

"Don't confuse me," said the tipsy young man, taking another big swallow from his glass. "We were talking about something else. Drunks and penguins."

"Did you ever see a drunken penguin?" asked Annabel, innocently. "They have Arctic circles under their eyes."

"How true," Bill murmured. "How too, too true."

"Now I know you're drunk," said the girl. "Come and let me

put your head under the faucet. You've got to sober up."

"Oh, no—I'm sober's a judge!"

At this ill-favored moment the door of the room opened.

"Quick!" Bill sprang to his feet. "The police must be here!" But it was not a policeman who entered the room. It was a duck.

A large, white, fat duck waddled into the room and sanity fled before it.

Bill bounded away to the wall.

"Good Lord! I must be drunk—it is a penguin!"

Annabel stared calmly at the duck as it waddled across the carpet, but Bill howled.

"Yes, I am drunk, all right. Get me a doctor!"

"That's no penguin, dear. That's only a duck."

"Then get a quack!" Bill, unnerved by the notion of being under the influence of alcohol, suddenly dropped to his hands and knees and crawled hastily towards the door. The duck waddled behind him, seeming to examine his retreating flanks in sly silence. Suddenly the bird extended its beak and Bill rose with a wild squeal. He darted at the bird, but it waddled into the washroom.

Bill sighed in relief. "Thank heavens it's gone," he breathed. "Give me a drink." He started across the floor, then half-tripped over an object lying on the carpet. It was round, and white, and shiny.

"A duck egg!" yelled the harassed young man. "It laid an egg on my carpet."

Annabel laughed, then stopped as her eyes encountered an apparition peering through the open doorway.



Chapter 8

IT WAS a face—a big, coarse face, followed by an even bigger and coarser body. The coarse face had a coarse voice, too. "Pardon me, folks," said the face in an offensive manner. "But have youse happened to see my duck?"

"Do you want to show us a duck?" asked Annabel, politely.

"No," the face denied. "I'm lookin' fer one. Is it loose in here, my duck?"

"I've seen your duck, all right!" Bill suddenly yelled. "And if I ever see it again, I'll knock the stuffing out of it."

"But it ain't a stuffed duck, Mister," whined the face. "It's a live one."

"I'll say it's a live one," Bill panted. "Look at this." And he thrust the newly-laid egg under the nose of the face in the doorway.

"What's the matter with it?" the face inquired. "That there's a good egg. Duck eggs is worth money. Don't get sore, Mister—just tell me where my duck is and I'll go away."

"What do you want with the duck, anyway?" Annabel asked.

"I'm a poultry-fancier," replied the face, proudly.

"Well, we didn't fancy this particular specimen."

"The face became suspicious. "Come clean now, folks. Where's my duck? What did youse do with it?"

"What can a person do with a duck anyway?" Annabel inquired.

The face was not convinced. "Did youse kill my duck?" it accused.

"Do we look like a couple of duck-murderers?" gibbered Bill.

"Well, somethin' happened to it," mused the face. "Been plenty of funny business in this hotel today, I hear. Duck busted outta the crate downstairs when I brung it to deliver to some magicians for the convention here. It's a trained duck, see? Does tricks. Magicians said they wanted a duck so as they could make it vanish. Well, it vanished, all right. So I follers it up here. Somethin' happened to it, and you folks had better pay the bill."

"What bill?" Annabel wanted to know in an insistent voice.

"Why, the bill for my duck."

"But your duck already has a bill," Annabel argued. "I saw it."

"And I felt it," Bill grated, rubbing his memento painfully.

This tipsy argument did none of the participants any good. The face became irate. "Come on, youse killed my duck and youse know it. Pay up and quit squawking!"

As if to refute his words, an agonized squawk now issued from behind the washroom door. Bill raced over.

The duck was swimming merrily about in the bath-tub.

Something snapped inside Bill at the sight. He reeled forward and plunged into the tub, seeking to strangle the mocking bird.

He slipped and struck his head—and went out, cold.

Bill came to five minutes later, on the sofa, with Annabel's arms around him.

"It's all right now," she soothed. "The duck is gone. And guess who's here?"

"The half-woman," Bill groaned.

"Wrong!" Hicks peered over the side of the sofa. "It's me and Tubby. We captured the half-woman and took her downstairs to be glued together or something. Anyway, she's out of the way, now, and everything is quiet. Aren't you glad we fixed things?"

"Sure," Bill sighed. "I heard about it in the elevator. You and those women. Such vulgar antics!"

"What you need, friend—aside from a drink, which is coming right up, that is—is a vacation from the hotel business," Tubby told him.

"Right, an excellent idea," Hicks chimed in. "Let's all go away from here and relax. We'll pick up the girls and find a spot to drink in."

"Now stop that!" Bill raged. "I'm through with vulgarity! I'd like something cultured and refined."

"The very thing," Annabel exclaimed. "Let's take Bill to the library. Or maybe a museum."

"Why not?" Hicks agreed. "I'll call Mrs. Pratt and Susan and tell them to meet us downstairs. Let the Magician's Convention run itself this evening. We'll get away from it all and have some nice, cultured, refined fun."

Bill groaned as Annabel assisted him to his feet. "This sounds too good to be true," he sighed. "I've got a sneaking hunch we're heading for trouble."

"What kind of trouble can you have in a museum?" Tubby wanted to know.

He soon found out.

THE PARTY met Mrs. Pratt and Susan Foster in the lobby.
"What's up?" asked Mrs. Pratt, sweetly.

"We're going to acquire culture," Hicks told her. This remark did not exactly kindle a look of enthusiasm on the blonde's face, and Marmaduke Hicks hastened to ask. "What's the matter? Don't you girls want to be cultivated?"

"Certainly," Susan Foster agreed. "My room number is—"

"Never mind!" Bill broke in. "I'm thinking of education."

"I'll handle your education," Annabel said, "You're my star pupil."

"I don't like this," Mrs. Pratt remarked as Tubby hailed a taxi. "That ex-husband of mine is very jealous, you know. He's been trying to get something on me for years. Wants to stop paying alimony. And I think he's been spying. If he finds me running around with strange men—"

"Oh, we're not strangers," Hicks assured. "We've been introduced."

"Nevertheless, I'm worried."

"Come on," Tubby coaxed, as the cab pulled up. He gave an address to the driver as the party took seats. Annabel climbed in last, completely ruining Bill's shoe-shine, and seated herself on

his lap, ruining his morale. The taxi jolted along.

In a few moments the vehicle halted before a large cafe. "Here we are," Tubby announced. The *Cafe de Paree*. Run by a little Frenchman named Le Vinsky."

"Here, this is no museum!" Bill protested.

"Don't be impatient. We'll get there. Just thought we ought to have a little refreshment first to tide us over."

"Have you no appreciation of art?" Bill raged. "They tell me the Metropolitan is showing a glassware collection from ancient ruins."

"They have some ancient bottles in here," Tubby soothed, "I appreciate them very much. And their contents will turn you into a magnificent ruin."

Bill, protesting, found Annabel dragging him in after the rest of the party, and soon the six were seated at a table near the orchestra. The noise depressed Bill so that he drank several stiff highballs without thinking. The others needed no encouragement. It was some time before a now befuddled Bill rose in determination.

"Enough of this," he announced. "We're going to a museum if it kills us. Come on, you promised!"

Another taxi took them down to the Metropolitan, which appeared to be closed for the night. "Too late," Tubby informed them. "We might as well go back to the cafe."

"No you don't!" Bill was stubborn. "If we do that we'll just get into trouble. I want a museum—any museum will do."

"Okay, buddy." The cab-driver entered into the conversation abruptly. "Museum it is. Let's go."

They went.

"Here you are, Buster!" The cab driver ground to a halt and gestured up at a large, dingy-looking structure over which hung the legend, *Imperial Wax Museum*.

"But this isn't a regular museum," Bill groaned. "Let's go somewhere else."

"Yes," Hicks agreed. "No wax museum for me. Who wants to look at a lot of candles?"

"Only one open this time o'night," the driver argued.

"All right. Come on in." Bill disembarked and helped the girls alight. They approached the door and paid admission to a dyspeptic and doleful doorman.

"Why so sad, friend?" Tubby asked, with alcoholic amiability.

"You'd be sad, too," the man replied, "if you had nothing else to do all day but look at a lot of dummies."

"Here, now, no insults."

"I mean the waxworks," assured the doorkeeper. "Give me the creeps, they do. Dummies all day long, that's all I see."

"Don't take it so hard—look what it did for Edgar Bergen."

This remark was lost on the doorkeeper. "It ain't so much the job itself," he babbled. "It's the bloodiness of the thing. Regular chamber of horrors. I get the shakes just thinking about it."

THE PARTY passed inside, then regretted it. For it was a chamber of horrors they entered, and no mistake. Some sweet, sadistic soul had executed the wax figures, and they were fiendishly calculated to inspire shudders. After looking around, Bill decided the designer should have been executed himself. The place was a domicile of dread.

At this evening hour the dim rooms were deserted, save for the sextette, and the wax figures assumed added terror in the silence.

"Have a drink," Tubby whispered, producing a pint bottle from his inside pocket. For once, Bill did not object, but swallowed as eagerly as the rest. In a moment, confidence restored, the party proceeded.

Jack the Ripper—Landru—Gilles de Retz—Dr. Crippen—Salome with the head of John the Baptist—Blackbeard the Pirate—the beheading of Anne Bolyen—the assassination of Marat—the murder of Rasputin—the Inquisition—the Cleveland Torso Slayings—all passed in review.

By now the party was growing gruesomely gay. A few nips from the bottle primed them against horror, and Mrs. Pratt giggled a trifle hysterically. Annabel clung to Bill and her nearness did things to his heart and head. He was almost content to give up the goal of culture. A certain recklessness rose in him, an urge to plunge madly into the sea of life and battle the waves until he reached the Happy Isles. Annabel did this to him and he no longer wanted to fight against it. He was ready for anything; or almost anything except what happened.

It was at this dangerous moment that another party entered the museum. It consisted of two heavy-set, thick-jowled men Bill remembered having seen back at the cafe they had stopped at for a drink. One of the big fellows seemed even more familiar; Bill did his best to remember his name.

"I could swear they came here," said the taller and fatter of

the two to his companion. "I wonder what she's pulling off now?"

"Heavens!" whispered the divorcee, suddenly ducking behind a pillar. "That man is my ex-husband, Mr. Pratt."

At the mention of the man's name, Tubby giggled.

"Don't laugh!" breathed the woman, furiously. "He's got his lawyer with him. They're after my alimony, all right."

"What'll we do?" Hicks asked. "We don't want to let him get his hands on that."

"Shut up and get out of here, fast," Mrs. Pratt hissed.

It seemed that everybody took an immediate dislike to Mr. Oswald Pratt. The beefy magician was much more like a typical big business man: big-muscled, big-shouldered, big-voiced and big-headed. The type of man who smoked expensive cigars, told cheap jokes, and knew only one master—the Almighty Dollar, which he ambiguously referred to as "Success." Mrs. Pratt, in fact, had divorced him mainly because he insisted on referring to her as "the little woman."

All this she hastily explained to her friends in a whisper as the two men peered about the gloomy corridors of the wax museum. "Now, let's sneak out before he sees me," she concluded.

HICKS PRODUCED the bottle again and passed it hastily. "Wait," he told them, "I have a great idea." He proceeded to explain it quickly in muffled tones. It was received with subdued but inebriated enthusiasm. A moment later the little group scattered off into the dimness, each bent on his or her own errand.

Meanwhile Mr. Pratt and his legal friend, "Honest John" O'Toole, paced rapidly down the center corridor.

"See anybody?" Pratt snapped impatiently. "Don't know where they could have gone to."

"If they're here, we'll find them," the legal eagle assured him. He glanced intently about him in the gathering gloom, but his professional eye was attracted by the fascinating parade of criminal activity displayed here. Before he realized it, O'Toole had taken up a position before the Gilles de Retz display and was gazing happily at the spectacle of Monsieur de Retz assaulting one of his wives with a long, sinister-looking knife.

"What's this?" demanded Pratt, halting beside the exhibit.

"Gilles de Retz," the lawyer explained. "French guy who killed his wives. Regular Bluebeard, that baby was."

"Good for him," Pratt muttered. "I wish to heaven I'd handled mine that way," He chewed his cigar viciously as he considered the last statement. "Yes," he continued, "I should have tried this on Dorothy."

"Why not?" said O'Toole, humoring his employer. "They say this was quite common in them old royal families."

"I come from a very old family," observed Pratt, proudly.

"Yeah?" sneered a voice out of nowhere. "Which one—the Jukes or the Kallikuks?"

Pratt, thinking this remark came from his companion, became indignant. "I'll have you know," he snapped, "that my ancestors came over on the Mayflower."

"Is that so?" mocked the voice. "Well, it's a goood thing the immigration laws are stricter now."

Pratt became livid. "What's that?" he demanded, collaring O'Toole.

"I didn't say anything. Not a word."

"Come on," Pratt rejoined. "There's something screwy going on here. Ever since I thought I saw that torso moving this morning, I've been a little punch-drunk, you know." He walked on, followed by his friend. Suddenly he halted beside the Salome exhibit.

"So help me," he observed, "if I didn't know that was a dummy, I'd swear this figure was my wife."

He pointed at Salome, who stood regarding the head of John the Baptist, which rested on top of a large cabinet.

"Not a bad figure," commented the lawyer, "for your wife."

"Ah, she wore falsies," sneered her ex-husband.

The Salome image trembled violently.

"Do my eyes deceive me," Pratt said, suddenly, "or did that dummy just quiver?"

"Must be the light."

"My wife used to quiver like that all the time." Pratt mused. "It was due to drinking, of course. That bat was always lushed up."

This was too much for the figure to bear.

"I can't blame her," said a furious feminine voice. "A woman would have to drink in order to stand living with you."

PRATT HAD the eyes of an insane fish. "Am I mad?" he asked "Torsos running this morning. Now a statue, moving and talking. Let's go back to the Convention—I want to lie

down."

"No," said O'Toole, a baffled look in his own bulging eyes. "You're not crazy. I heard a voice too." Suddenly he reached out and tapped the figure of Salome with his cane. The response was instantaneous although it did not come from Salome.

Instead, the head of John the Baptist began to squirm hideously on the cabinet. The eyes opened and bearded lips writhed into a horrid life. It was a nasty-looking head with a brown beard and incongruously red hair. There seemed to be a lighted cigar between its lips.

"Lay off the lady," the severed head whispered. "And put down that cane, you squirt, before I bite it in half."

With shrill gasps, the two men turned and fled down the aisle. In their confusion, they ran in the wrong direction.

"It spoke to me," O'Toole kept mumbling. "It spoke to me!"

"Did you notice the cigar?" Pratt panted. "I wonder how it could inhale?" Then, "Now what?" he cried, caroming into a hooded figure that blocked the passage with upraised sword.

"Just a dummy," he sighed, in relief. The figure, on inspection, proved to be part of the group depicting the death of Rasputin. It was a realistic scene—too realistic for Pratt's jangled nerves. He gazed at it in mute horror for a moment while regaining his breath. Suddenly he spotted something peculiar.

"Funny," he observed. "I never knew that guy Rasputin wore glasses before." He pointed a shaking finger at the Mad Monk who was lying on the floor in a pool of red paint. Rasputin was indeed wearing glasses—and his beard had a tendency to sag rather foolishly to one side.

"Everything's wrong in here," whispered O'Toole. "Rasputin with glasses, Salome with the quivers, and John the Baptist getting his voice back after that throat operation. Think it's all a trick? After all, you're a magician."

"Since that torso business this morning I'm not so sure," Pratt replied. "Did you notice all the strangers at the Convention? Funny-looking characters I never saw or heard of before. Some of them came in tonight, and I swear something terrible's going to happen before long. This is all a part of it, too. Maybe I'd better resign, get out of this racket, turn in my wand to the union."

"Don't let it get you, pal," said O'Toole. "We're still out to find your ex-wife. I mean business and nothing is gonna scare me off her trail."

Suddenly Pratt was tapped on the shoulder by a hand out of nowhere. He whirled and confronted a very tall thin gentleman who wore a streetcar conductor's uniform.

"Right this way, gents—I'm the guide," said the man.

Perhaps the guide might have explained why somewhere down the line was a naked window dummy which had once worn the streetcar conductor's uniform in a scene depicting *Murders of the Mad Motorman Who Went Off His Trolley*.



Chapter 9

BUT MR. HICKS did not choose to reveal this. Instead he led his unsuspecting victims easily along the aisle, drowning out their protests in a flood of conversation.

"Wonderful museum we have here," he babbled. "Never saw a more splendid set of waxworks. Speaking of waxworks," and he turned to address O'Toole, "do you wax your mustache?"

"I haven't got a mustache."

"But would you wax it if you had one?" inquired Hicks, earnestly.

"Certainly not!"

"Then how about a nice mustache *made* of wax?" pursued Hicks. "Would you care to buy one? I could steal it for you off that statue of General Grant over there."

"I don't want any of your lousy mustaches," O'Toole said, wearing the look of confusion Hicks had made for him. "I'm here on business. I'm a criminal lawyer."

"What did they throw you in for?"

"You don't understand," Mr. O'Toole managed to answer, in a strained voice. "Everything I do is within the law."

"Well, I know just the place for a lawyer like you," Hicks

babbled, stalling for time. "You ought to see our mounted police exhibit."

"Canadian Northwest?" inquired O'Toole, more out of desperation than any desire to know.

"New York mounted police," Hicks answered.

"How did you get the horses?"

"What horses?"

"Why, for the mounted police."

"There are no horses," said Hicks.

"Then what are the policemen mounted on?"

"Why on a platform, of course."

"Phooey on all this," interrupted Mr. Pratt. "See here, I'm in this place looking for my wife."

"What would she be doing in this museum?" parried the false guide, with a disarming smile. "Don't tell me you married one of the waxworks?"

"No," Pratt forced himself to reply. "But I think she's hiding here. As a matter of fact," he continued, "she might be right over there." And he pointed to Mary, Queen of Scots.

Before Hicks could stop him, Pratt bolted over the railing and began to shake the wax figure violently. But he was wrong—the dummy did not move.

"You're crazy," the guide assured him.

"Beginining to think so myself," Pratt muttered. He laughed shrilly. "Perhaps we're all crazy. Maybe I'm Napoleon."

"No!" boomed a voice. "*I am Napoleon!*"

At the sound of these words Pratt wheeled suddenly, then collapsed. Tubby, in the costume of the Little Corporal, stood at his side. "I'm Napoleon," he announced. "You must be nuts!" Then he stared at O'Toole. "Don't start telling me you're King Tut, either, because this gentleman can prove it."

And Mr. O'Toole was forced to confront Bill, who leered at him madly from inside an open mummy-case.

Where the girls had found the Wooden Horse of Troy will never be known. It is enough they had, and somehow managed to struggle into it. Now this beast put in an untimely appearance.

There is nothing worse than the sight of a wobbly wooden horse in a wax museum—a big wooden horse that is unexpectedly alive. As this nightmare loped drunkenly down the corridor on six legs, Mr. Pratt and Mr. O'Toole suddenly decided that they had suffered enough.

With low animal moans they fled for the door, just as the horse suddenly split in the middle and pursued them. The head charged Mr. O'Toole and the terrifying other end bounded after Mr. Pratt. Neither of these gentlemen stopped running until the museum was several blocks behind them.

Here a policeman halted them and asked the reason for their haste.

"The head of a wooden horse was chasing me," gasped O'Toole.

The policeman sneered and looked at Mr. Pratt. "And just what was chasing you?" he asked.

But for some reason, Mr. Pratt wouldn't tell. He just sat down on the sidewalk and strangled himself.

"**G**REAT WORK!" said Mr. Hicks, surveying his companions. "I'm proud of you."

"Splendid," Mrs. Pratt agreed, emerging from the wooden horse-head. "You frightened that wretch almost to death. Let's all have a drink on that."

The bottle changed hands. Annabel handed it to Bill, who was helplessly fumbling in his mummy-wrappings.

"Baby want?" she inquired. "You know, you look cute that way."

"Get me out of here," demanded the struggling young man. He took a long drink that didn't do him any good, and a long look that helped a great deal.

"Why, Bill, you're helpless," exclaimed the girl. She placed her arms about the man, and in a moment Bill was investigating the claims set forth by the advertisements of a popular lipstick.

The experiment was pleasant and prolonged. By the time it was finished, Tubby had an idea.

"Let's give our wax friends here a break," said the fat man, with a tipsy leer. "Don't forget, they were a big help to us and they deserve a reward."

"What can you do for a wax dummy?" demanded Susan Foster, who had a practical mind about some things.

"Well, we could take them out and buy them all a drink."

"Fine!" Hicks agreed, without knowing why, "I'll handle the doorman."

He went out into the corridor and approached the door fellow who stared stolidly into the night, ignoring all uproar from

within the museum.

"Nice place you have here," Hicks said. "We enjoyed it a lot."

"That's funny," mused the doorman. "Two other guys went in for a while and then they came running out like the devil himself was at their heels."

"They weren't frightened," lied Hicks, valiantly. "Just killing time for a while and then they had to leave in a hurry." He lowered his voice. "You see, one of them expected to become a father."

"He picked a funny place for it," snorted the doorman sourly.

"Don't be silly," Hicks argued. "One can become a father almost anywhere."

"I'd hate to become one in a wax museum," said the doorman. "The kid might be born with two heads." Suddenly the dour man warmed up and became talkative. "My cousin's wife once had a baby in a movie theatre. Twins."

"Oh," Hicks murmured. "A double feature."

"Right," said the doorman. "But she only had a chance to see one show. Later she went back and got her money refunded."

Now Hicks had intended to confuse the doorman, but he was more than a little confused himself by this conversation. "Here," he said, producing the bottle. "Have a drink."

The doorkeeper accepted. As he tilted his head back, his neck gurgled and contorted in a revolting fashion.

Hicks stopped the foul spectacle by deftly winding a scarf around the man's neck. He produced another and tied his hands and feet. Then he deposited him safely on a couch inside the hall, and reclaimed his bottle.

"Hereafter don't drink strange liquor," he warned the writhing man. "It's liable to gag you." On this remark he turned and rejoined his companies inside.

His friends were drunkenly selecting their waxwork escorts. Tubby took to another redhead—Queen Elizabeth, Mrs. Pratt seemed to find comfort in that divorce-fiend, Henry the Eighth. Susan Foster, for no reason at all, decided on Rasputin. Bill merely grabbed the first dummy available—which unfortunately proved to be Lady Godiva. Annabel sniffed at him and turned to something called a *Chinese Hatchet Victim*. Hicks lifted down Madame Pompadour.

The result was quaint, to say the least. Tubby still wore the Napoleon costume, Bill's mummy-wrappings were intact, and



Hicks changed the guide outfit for a convict suit. The three women wore their street clothes. Thus arrayed, the party crept out the front entrance, each dragging a silent wax companion.

Convict and French courtesan; Napoleon and the Virgin Queen; the overdressed dummy and the over-exposed Lady Godiva; followed by three girls escorting a bloody corpse, a bloody king and a bloody monk—it was a ghastly procession.

Two taxis were summoned—for a cabdriver will carry Death Himself, provided that gentleman has the fare—and the motley assemblage whizzed back down the street to the Cafe de Paree.

IT WAS THE after-theatre dinner hour as they entered, and tables were crowded. A harassed head waiter met them in the doorway. When his eyes had feasted upon the costumes of these unusual customers, his overworked smile sagged dreadfully. It was only by straining his suavity to the utmost that he was able to meet the commanding gaze of Mr. Hicks.

"Well?" challenged the gentleman in the convict suit. "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing, M'sieu," the waiter assured in a voice that entirely lacked conviction. "Nothing at all."

"Get us a table," Hicks ordered. "A big table." Then, "Don't mind us, we're going to a masquerade party," he explained, "and besides, we're all awfully drunk."

This last statement was heartily endorsed by the head waiter. Never had he seen a more dreadfully drunken crowd. Fully half of these people seemed incapable of walking at all, but were supported by their partners. Some of them seemed to stare quite hideously, with eyes void of all expression. Unless he escorted them to a table at once, it was quite possible that a number of his guests would collapse on the lobby floor, and this would be a bad advertisement for the cafe.

Accordingly, Francois, forcing a fixed and frozen smile, bowed to Hicks and choked forth a despairing, "Follow me M'sieu." The half-dummy, half-drunken cavalcade trailed across the empty dance floor.

The bodies of the wax dummies dangled from their partner's arms, and the feet trailed loathsomely behind. Once or twice the living members of the party got their own legs tangled up, or tramped viciously on waxen toes. But the expression on the dummy faces never altered. Dorothy Pratt finally became so

enraged at the antics of Henry the Eighth that she picked him up bodily and slung him across her shoulder.

This remarkable procession did not pass unnoticed by the patrons of the cafe, who gazed in wonder at the group's peculiar progress.

"Gawd!" breathed a lady from Brooklyn to her escort. "What is this, a circus? That must be the strong woman."

"Lordy!" muttered a well known Broadway columnist. "What will Billy Rose think of next?" He shook his head. "If they're celebrities, I don't know them. Unless that fellow with the beard is one of the Smith Brothers."

"Don't say that," pleaded his companion. "Because if you tell me that little fat guy is really Napoleon, I'm going to collapse."

Several other customers seemed prepared to follow his example. Fortunately for their shattered nerves, the group finally found places at a table on the far side of the dancefloor.

Francois stood by while the group seated themselves, then wished he hadn't. The six drunkest of the lot—which were, of course, the dummies—were brutally dumped into chairs by the more lively members of the party. The sight of Susan Foster daintily affixing a napkin to Rasputin's beard was almost too much for the head waiter's sanity. Casting professional dignity to the winds, Francois stared aghast.

"What's the matter, man, are you crazy?" asked Hicks. The head waiter refused to answer that one. He had too many doubts.

"Bring us twelve champagne cocktails." Hicks ordered. "The way your hands tremble, you can probably shake them up yourself."



Chapter 10

Francois regarded his hands intently for a moment. They were indeed shaking most violently. He attempted to stop them by clenching his fists, which gave him the appearance of a man trying to shake two pair of dice at once.

"Well," barked Hicks, "what's the matter—St. Vitus Dance?" He turned to his comrades. "What a dive! The management is so destitute they have to employ a head waiter with palsy!"

Stifling a sob, Francois hurried away. "Twelve champagne cocktails," he told the bartender. "And don't spare the arsenic!"

From which it might be concluded that Francois was very upset indeed, for the Cafe de Paree had never served anything remotely resembling arsenic since the days of the wartime liquor shortage.

Bill and his friends were now settled at the table and they had time to glance around. The other patrons were engaged in the good old American custom of having a "big evening." The place was filled with sophisticated cosmopolites from Omaha, while at the bar crouched a few native New Yorkers, who gazed timidly at their more daring big-city cousins.

It was an unusual spectacle for Bill and a common one for

Annabel. She didn't laugh, because she pited these people and their philosophy. They were trying so hard to snatch a little happiness and paying so dearly for the privilege. Tomorrow many of them would be on their way home—back to their offices, their household drudgery, their children, and the long winter nights.

Life was pretty much routine for most people, Annabel decided. She and her carefree companions were among the elect. If she could only make Bill understand that; learn the secret of living without worrying about appearances. Not like these pathetic couples who would return tomorrow to eternal monotony with nothing but the memory of this synthetic evening to comfort them. They were so brave about it, too; so eager to go through the motions of enjoyment. Willingly they endured the outlandish cover charges, the hideous music, the indigestible food, the watered liquor, the veiled insults of sneering head waiters and condescending check-room girls. They were paying the price of their fun—and Annabel wished them luck.

These musings were interrupted by the appearance of the waiter, bearing the cocktails. He set them down without comment, although his eyes bulged when he reached the Chinese Axe Victim.

"Something seems to be the matter with this gentleman," he chattered indicating the dummy's throat, which had been gruesomely gored by the artist to show the spot where the hatchet had struck.

"Why, he's just drunk," Annabel assured him, tranquilly.

"But—but look at his neck!" the waiter waited, indicating the cut throat.

"Oh, that?" laughed the girl. "I guess he must have cut himself. He's always been so careless about shaving."

The waiter received this explanation with a horrified stare. "Your friend must use an awfully big razor," he ventured, thoughtfully.

"Yes," Annabel answered. "He carries it around with him to use on people who ask impertinent questions."

This was enough to send the waiter tottering away. That night he dropped seventeen plates and three brandy glasses. The next day the unfortunate man quit his job and entered a monastery, where he remained in his cell and refused to shave all the rest of his life.

Meanwhile the inscrutable workings of alcohol were having

their usual effect on the group.

"Now that we've got our drinks," Susan Foster remarked, in a practical voice, "just what do you intend to do with them? The dummies don't really drink you know." "We'll each drink two," Tubby decided. "And order some more, fast. Don't want anyone to get suspicious."

They drank and re-ordered. "Not much fun for the dummies," Hicks remarked. "Let's at least act sociable and talk to them."

So presently the staring patrons of the Cafe de Paree had to watch six lively drunks conversing with six dead ones.

"Why, I've never seen anything like it in my life!" said an angular lady from Idaho. "Half those people look as if they were dead."

Her companion, a traveling salesman from Baltimore, gazed at the group with distaste.

"They should be dead," he muttered. "If I had a gun, I'd shoot them myself. Especially that fellow in the beard. I wouldn't care to be living with that thing on."

"Neither would I!" said the lady, emphatically.

HICKS noticed the stares and whispered, "I'm afraid they're getting wise to us. We'd better make it look as if these dummies were alive, or some fool will come over and investigate."

Consequently the lady from Idaho had to watch while the dummies were manipulated by their companions; forced to bow and nod in their seats. Wax arms were raised and lowered with most astonishing haste. Rasputin was operated so that it appeared as if his corpse-like fingers were actually stroking the hairs of his nauseating beard. Henry the Eighth bounced up and down in his seat. Madame Le Pompadour sat on Hicks' lap and that callous gentleman pretended to kiss her. Queen Elizabeth had her napkin tucked in by Bill. Unfortunately he shoved it into her bodice a trifle too far and it began to disappear down the front of her gown. Absent-mindedly enough, Bill reached down and grabbed it.

This sight was too much for the lady from Idaho. She fainted on the spot. Her companion rose abruptly and strode over to the table.

"What's coming off here?" he demanded.

Bill looked up, letting go of the napkin in surprise.

"Why, nothing at all," he answered, brightly. Then he glanced down at the floor. "At least, I hope not."

Then what are you doing to the lady?"

"Well," Bill considered. "It appears she dropped her napkin. I was just being a gentleman and picking it up for her."

As he spoke, Bill noticed the napkin had again disappeared inside the dress. He reached for it once more. The salesman stood and goggled at the sight until Bill had finally captured the napkin, rolled down his sleeve and waved the cloth around like a flag of victory.

"Got it at last!" he exclaimed, happily.

"So I see," replied the salesman. Then, in a lower voice, "Doesn't the lady object to your familiarity?"

"Too drunk," Bill told him, gravely. "She wouldn't know it if I dropped a table-cloth down her chest." He thought about it for a moment. "But I'd sure hate to have to go after a thing like that."

"I'd sure hate to watch you," the salesman assured him.

"But that's a mere trifle." Bill improvised, wishing the man would go away. "When she gets going, there's no stopping her. Sometimes she loses knives and forks that way, or even dishes. Once it was a whole leg of lamb."

The man looked quite sick, now.

"Yes sir!" cried Bill gaily. "When this little lady gets really drunk you never know what will drop next. Sometimes I get so tired of fishing for things, I'd like to send down a diver."

This final concept was entirely too much for the salesman. He turned and dragged back to his table where he proceeded to collapse alongside the body of his unconscious partner. It is not definitely known whether either of them ever got up again.

Meanwhile Annabel, in a vain effort to make her dummy look alive, had unfortunately bumped its head against the back of a chair. It cracked open on one side, and a thin trickle of powdered wax and sawdust now streamed down onto her plate.

At this point the waiter returned with fresh drinks. He stood watching the little mound of sawdust for some time. At last his bewilderment burst all bounds.

"Pardon me, miss," he said, curiously, "but isn't that sawdust there on your plate?"

"Sawdust?" flared Annabel, noticing it for the first time. "Why—certainly not. It's—it's breakfast food!" she announced, defiantly.

"I'd have sworn that was sawdust, lady," pursued the waiter, thoughtfully. He was an observant, scientific-minded soul.

"Well, it's not sawdust," retorted the girl. "I always bring my breakfast food with me when I go out. Doctor's orders."

"I'd have to be pretty sick to eat that stuff, lady," said the waiter. "And without cream or sugar, either."

"I like it that way," said Annabel, wildly. To prove her words she took a spoon and forced herself to choke down a mouthful. Then she smiled, bitterly.

THE WAITER, however, was still unsatisfied. Glancing around, he noticed the marks of sawdust in the Hatchet Victim's hair.

"What's this, if I might ask?" he queried, suddenly. "More breakfast food on the gentleman's head?"

"Dandruff," Annabel explained.

"I see," mused the waiter. "I see." He kept staring.

"Come on, everybody," Annabel said, in a desperate attempt to get away. "Let's all dance."

Had the partners been sober, they would have avoided this suggestion like the plague. But acting on drunken impulse, they all decided to drag their inanimate partners out on the dance-floor and mutilate their arches to the raucous rhythm.

The cafe, by this time, was jammed to the eaves by a vast throng of pleasure-benders, and the dance-floor was correspondingly crowded. Many of the newcomers had not yet seen the partners and their queer companions. Now they got a generous eyeful.

The wax dummies made poor dancing partners. Bill and Annabel soon abandoned Lady Godiva and the Chinese Hatchet Victim, and danced with each other. Hicks managed rather well with Madame Pompadour, since her long skirt hid the dragging feet.

Tubby and Queen Elizabeth, however, had their troubles. Elizabeth's legs dragged along the floor almost a foot behind her as the little fat man twirled her torso. The dragging feet soon attracted attention from the other dancers, and Tubby began to get embarrassed. Finally he hit upon a solution. Opening up the coat of his Napoleon costume, he shoved the dummy's feet into his pockets and contented himself by dancing with the upper half. The result was loathsome to look upon. From a distance it looked as if the Virgin Queen was using her partner

for a step-ladder.

"What a deal!" observed an opulent brunette, indicating the two. "Look—that woman is actually dancing with her feet in that man's pockets."

"Must be a new step," her partner told her.

"Well, I don't want to learn it," declared the brunette.

Others were of the same opinion. A small redhead, however, stopped in the middle of the floor and watched the performance eagerly.

"What will that Arthur Murray think up next?" she breathed to her companion. "We ought to try and learn that one." And she, in turn, attempted to put her feet in her escort's pockets.

"Cut it out," gasped the man. "This is no place for horseback riding."

Mrs. Pratt waltzed by with Henry the Eighth. The merry monarch was a heavy armful for the blonde divorcee, but she was game to the finish. She had never been known to lose a man unless she wanted to, and this was no time to begin. Accordingly she danced furiously, jiggling the dummy in her arms and kicking its waxen feet vigorously. About this time one of the legs detached itself from the body. Mrs. Pratt failed to notice its loss immediately, but others did.

A fat woman and her escort were the first to make the discovery. Under the impression that it was merely one of her partner's corns, the fat woman trod on the loose limb heavily. It squished. She glanced down and recoiled in horror.

"Yaaaah!" she screeched. "Look! It's a man's leg!" Her companion, who was more than a little bottle-fatigued, looked down with bleary eyes.

"Whassa matter?" he mumbled. "Aintcha never seen a man's leg before?"

"But there's no body with it," explained the fat woman, hysterically.

"Why should there be anybody with it?"

"I mean there's nobody attached to this leg," the woman sobbed.

"Who ever heard of someone bein' attached to a leg?" demanded the drunken gentleman, impatiently. "People seldom fall in love with legs, honey," he assured her. So saying, he lurched forward and stumbled over the revolting white limb.

"It's a leg!" he screamed. "A bloody human leg!" A second later both he and the woman fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Fortunately, they both rolled off the dance floor and under a table.

BUT NOW, for the first time, Mrs. Pratt realized what had happened to her dummy. Uttering a little shriek of dismay, she hastily dropped Henry the Eighth to the floor, whereupon the other limb fell off. Hastily, she dragged the wax carcass to the table. A number of dancers around her decided they had better return to their tables at the same time and take quick drinks. There was muttering and mumbling, staring and pointing. But the orchestra kept on playing and Bill, Annabel, Tubby, Queen Elizabeth, Susan Foster and Rasputin Hicks and Pompadour kept on dancing in apparent unconcern.

Susan Foster was finding that Rasputin was not an ideal partner, either. In some fashion or other she had managed to get her hands tangled in the waxwork's beard. Now, try as she might, she could not release her fingers. Finally, in desperation, she began to shake the dummy violently from side to side.

The dance floor being almost entirely empty this spectacle was clearly observed by all. The effect was that of a young woman earnestly endeavoring to strangle her escort on the spot.

Amidst a chorus of horrified groans, Miss Foster succeeded in dislodging her hands at last—and with them her partner's head.

Rasputin's skull slipped to the floor with a dreadful thud, and Susan, blushing as well she might, dragged the headless corpse back to her table. Hicks, Tubby and Dorothy Pratt raced after her and got ready to make a fast exit.

For the tumult by now had attracted the attention of an excited knot of waiters, and the police would doubtless be called any minute. The majority of the patrons remained glued (or in some cases, plastered) to their seats. Word had gone around that this whole thing must be part of the regular floor-show, which was a brutal enough performance in itself. So the spectators stayed and waited for developments.

Bill and Annabel, blissfully unaware of these last horrors, danced on with eyes only for each other. They circled the empty dance-floor gracefully, and might have gone on forever if Bill hadn't made a startling discovery.

Looking down, he noticed that his mummy-wrappings were loosened by the dancing and starting to unwind, once started, they unravelled quickly.

So the patrons of the Cafe de Paree were treated to still another illuminating exhibition—a most revealing spectacle. Annabel, in a vain attempt to keep Bill's costume intact grabbed one loose end of the bandage and hung on, grimly. At the same time Bill tried to turn. The result was devastating.

For Bill, unable to stop, spun around like a whirling dervish. The wrappings kept unwinding. The harder Annabel tugged, the faster Bill was forced to spin. Like a maddened top he revolved while the bandages rolled away. Finally, like a shot out of hell, Bill catapulted across the room, naked to his shorts, and dropped right at the foot of his own table. The crowd, now convinced this was all part of the show, applauded wildly. Annabel bowed and stalked off.

The management, hearing the applause of the audience, might have been content to let the matter drop without starting trouble, if things hadn't suddenly taken a new turn—and for the worse.



Chapter 11

AT THIS critical moment a waiter conducted two drunken gentlemen to a nearby table. These gentlemen happened to be Mr. Oswald Pratt and Mr. O'Toole. The two victims of the wax museum had ceased their flight at last in a tavern and thereupon sensibly drowned their painful memories in drink. By successive stages of locomotion and intoxication they had worked their way back to the Cafe de Paree.

Now they sat directly opposite the friends, who did not notice their arrival at the moment. Bill and his companions were talking about leaving.

"Why go?" Hicks asked. "These people think it's all a gag anyway."

"Well, I'm not so sure," said Bill. He had salvaged a table-cloth and now stood shivering beside his chair. "Somebody is certain to ask questions."

Opinions flowered pro and con, and so did drinks. But it was Mr. Pratt who decided the matter for them. His bloodshot eyes suddenly hit the next table.

"Ye gods!" he bellowed. "They're back again, O'Toole—the dummies are back again and they are alive!"

O'Toole stared. "There's your ex-wife!" he yelled, pointing frantically. "See her over there with that convict?"

The two men rose and ran towards the table, but the partners saw them coming. Pratt, shouting hoarsely, tried to grab for Dorothy. Instead he received the body of Queen Elizabeth full in the face. He went down, strangling in a sea of petticoats.

O'Toole received Madame le Pompadour—in fact, he was given practically an entire harem as Bill added Lady Godiva and somebody contributed the legless Henry the Eighth. Throwing a tablecloth over the two prostrate men, the party rushed for the exit.

It all happened so quickly that they met with little resistance. Two waiters, however, tried to block the doorway as they rushed out. One of them was the suspicious fellow who had served them.

"Don't let them get away," he warned his companion. "They're all a bunch of truck-murderers, if you ask me."

As if to corroborate this statement, he received a hearty blow on the head with the trunk of the Chinese Hatchet Victim which Bill now wielded as a battering ram. The other waiter caught a similar clout. His skull was hard enough to break the body of the dummy as the blow landed. Consequently, the horrified patrons of the cafe seemed to see one man broken in half on another man's head.

After this there was no opposition. The three girls, the convict, the drunken Napoleon, and the man in the table-cloth reached the exit in safety and disappeared immediately into a convenient taxicab.

That evening the Cafe de Paree closed its doors forever, and did not re-open until the following Monday, when it became the Paree Cafe. Such was the devastating effect of this unusual incident upon Broadway night life.

"So much for culture!" Bill raged as the cab carried them back to the Flopmoor. "I hope you're all satisfied, now."

"What's the trouble?" Hicks inquired. "Didn't you learn anything?"

"I learned what it feels like to be chased and assaulted and stripped practically naked in a public place," Bill retorted, bitterly.

"But you were so clever, so brave," Annabel consoled, snuggling close. "When you hit that waiter over the head I was proud of you."

"Were you, really?" asked the poor dope with a silly grin on his face.

"We were all proud of you," Tubby asserted, drunkenly. "It's a pleasure to live in the same hotel with a manager like you."

"Good heavens, the hotel!" Bill sat upright again. "You boys were right about one thing—I did manage to forget the hotel worries for a while. But I wonder what's been happening tonight while I was away?"

HE FOUND out soon enough. As soon as they entered the lobby, the house detective rushed up and grabbed Bill by the table-cloth.

"Thank goodness you're here, boss, he breathed. "Hey, what happened—you been playing strip poker?"

"Never mind," Annabel cut in. "What's the trouble?"

"Everything," sighed the detective. "First off, there's all them phoney names."

"What phoney names?"

"Right after dark, characters started coming in to register.

All of them had the same pitch—they were with the Convention, of course. Looked like magicians, acted like magicians, so I paid no attention. I'm just about used to screwballs by now." He eyed Hicks and Tubby for a moment before continuing. "But then I got a gander at the names they signed in the register. Here, take a look." He dragged Bill over to the desk and Bill read the list of recent arrivals.

"Cagliostro," he said. "Why, wasn't that some charlatan who lived back in the Eighteenth Century?"

"Don't ask me," Hicks replied. "I wasn't around."

"Comte de St. Germain," Bill continued. "Merlin. Why, that's impossible! Merlin, indeed!"

"Real old pappy guy with a long white beard," the desk-clerk informed him. "Talked a funny line of English, he did. Carried one of those sticks with a star on top."

"A wand," Tubby muttered. "Just like at King Arthur's Court. Notice anything else queer about him?"

"Well, he went into the grill to eat," the clerk said. "And I understand he kicked up an awful fuss because they wouldn't seat him at a round table."

"It can't be!" Bill muttered. "It can't be!"

"They all asked the same thing," the house detective went on. "Wanted to know the room number of that guy, L. Dritch.

Guess they're friends of his."

"Any friend of his is no friend of mine," Bill declared. "This looks like trouble to me. All these abnormal arrivals," He scanned the register again. "Well, at least we seem to have had one normal customer. This Dr. Stein."

"Dr. Frank N. Stein," the desk-clerk corrected.

"No—not *that!*"

"Shall we go up and interview some of these guests?" Hicks asked.

"Good idea." said Bill. But he was interrupted. Employees began to arrive in the lobby.

THE FIRST was an elderly charwoman. She waddled up to Bill and sobbed on his table-cloth. "Yer the manager, aintcher?" she snivelled. "Well, I got er report ter make. They been stealin' my brooms out er the broom-closets, that's what. Stealin' all my brooms."

"Who stole your brooms?"

"Old ladies. Whole bleedin' snag er them old ladies. Come with er Magicians, they said. Nasty, foul-mouthed old biddies they was, too. Opened up the broom closets on all er floors an' grabbed the brooms. Said they was goin' up to er roof and go for a ride. Never saw er bunch of drunken old ladies like them before."

"Cats!" interrupted a bellhop, angrily. "Hotel's full of black cats. Women brought 'em in. Want me to walk their dizzy cats for 'em."

"What about that wolf up in 711?" complained another bellboy. "Not the one with the blonde, I mean the *real* wolf. He tried to take a bite out of my leg just ten minutes ago."

"That ees of no useless," spluttered a man in a chef's hat and apron, who appeared, brandishing a ladle. "The deep-freeze, she is occupied. I weesh to make an ask, who rents room in the deep-freeze, no?"

"What's all this?" The desk-clerk shrugged. "I didn't rent the deep-freeze. Somebody parking their luggage in there?"

"A customer, he requests the crabs. I hasten to procure of same from the deep-freeze. I open the door and—low and behold—ees a man, sleeping on inside. I inform him to take the hell out of there. 'Shut up' he explains to me. 'You weel capture your death of coldness' I venture. 'Ha ha!' he remarks. 'I like eet here. Eet reminds me of a tomb.' And I swear by *bleu*

he appears as one who belongs in a tomb. He sports of a long black cloak—”

“Pseudo W. Nym,” Annabel said. “Remember? Another of Mr. Dritch’s friends.”

“I do not get friendly with such,” the chef assured her. “I shake of my head. I slam of the door. I run as though hell. The customer, let him go another hotel for crabs.”

“They’re lousing up the ballroom,” proclaimed the steward, emerging from the elevator. “Old fella in a long beard is in there— claims he’s on the Entertainment Committee for the Grand Hallowe’en Ball tomorrow night. Found him drawing a lot of stars and circles all over the floor with blue chalk. And two of our oldest guests just checked out because one of them found a coffin in her closet.”

“Was the coffin empty?” Bill managed to ask.

“Yes, it was empty, all right. But there was a sign pinned on the cover that said, BACK IN TEN MINUTES,” the steward replied.

“Tell him about the bats,” the desk-clerk reminded. “Whole top floor of the hotel seems to be filled with bats.”

“The whole place is filled with bats,” Bill declared. “But it’s after midnight. I can’t settle all these things now without disturbing all the guests. Better let it ride until morning. Just do what you can. As I recall, the Magicians are going out on a sight-seeing tour all day. That will leave the hotel pretty well deserted. We can decide on a plan, go through the hotel room by room if we must, and get rid of all these queer characters.

“Clean the place up in time for the Ball tomorrow night. In that way we won’t arouse any more talk than we need to, and we’ll solve the problem sensibly. Now—for heaven’s sake—let’s all try to get some sleep.”

HE TURNED to this companions. “I advise you to do the same,” he said. “No more carousing tonight, please. We seem to be up against something mighty strange here. I don’t want to have to call the police or get us involved in a public scandal, so let’s take it easy. Tomorrow we’ll track down the mystery. Tonight, we rest.”

There was a lot of head-shaking and shrugging, but in the end Bill won them over. The house-detective and room-clerk promised to keep their eyes open for disturbances; the bell-boys were alerted, and the party dispersed.

Bill kissed Annabel goodnight in the lobby.

"You know something?" she whispered. "This is all doing you a world of good."

"Because the hotel is being ruined?" he asked, "or because I am?"

"Don't talk that way. Two days ago you wouldn't have had the courage to face anything like this. You'd have turned and run away. Now—thanks to my cooperation—you're ready for anything."

"That's what I'm likely to get," Bill told her. "Anything and everything. But you're right. I'm enjoying myself, for the first time in my life."

"I'm glad," said the girl, and meant it.

They parted, and Bill sought his room and bed. He had imagined himself to be much too upset for slumber, but the moment his head touched the pillow he drifted off into a deep and dreamless sleep.

He slept for several hours. And then—

When Bill lifted his eyelids he thought for a moment he hadn't wakened. Then he suddenly realized his bed was on fire.

The ringing in his ears didn't come from an alarm clock but from a fire-engine in the street below. Bill blinked and got out of the smoking bed very quickly. It was turning dawn outside, but the flaming bolster of the bed lent light to the room—and speed to Bill's progress towards the window.

As he reached it, the window opened from outside and a fireman thrust his face in. He was a pale, gaunt fireman with a sleepy look in his eyes. Even his mustache drooped with boredom.

"Good morning, Mister," drawled the fireman.

"Who are you?" demanded Bill, still dazed. "A Peeping Tom?"

"You got the wrong party," said the helmeted man. "My name's Charlie Jenkins."

"Never mind the introductions," answered the now frantic young man in pajamas. "I've got a fire on my hands."

"Don't see any there," observed Fireman Jenkins, peering at Bill's hands.

"In my room, then. My bed's burning."

"Oh," observed the blinking intruder. "Kinda thought I smelled smoke." Slowly he crawled through the window. "How'd you start it" he lazily inquired.

"I'm a Boy Scout," Bill raged. "I rubbed a couple of bed-posts together and there it was."

The fireman gazed down at the bed, which now burst into active flames.

"You suppose I better put it out?" he said, at last.

"What do you want to do?" Bill demanded, "Roast some marshmallows over it?"

"Don't care for marshmallows." shrugged the fireman, as he dragged a hose through the window. He pointed the nozzle and allowed a thin stream of water to play over the rapidly-burning bed. He had the expression of a man watering a garden full of pansies.



Chapter 12

BILL DANCED about him in a frenzy. "Put it out!" he screamed. "Hurry up—don't let the hotel burn down!"

"I'm putting it out," retorted the fireman, wearily. "Fast as I can, too. Maybe you'd like to help by sitting on the flames?" he suggested, in a bitter voice.

"Don't waste time—the whole place will burn down around our ears."

"Might burn down farther than that," Fireman Jenkins said glancing at Bill, "It's lower than your waist right now."

Sure enough, sparks had ignited Bill's pajama pants. "Put me out!" he yelled, and the fireman turned the hose on him, sending him backwards over the still-smouldering bed. Jenkins continued to play water over the blaze until it was extinguished. Then he handed the hose to a companion on the ladder outside and picked up an ax. He headed for the door.

"Never mind!" Bill screamed, "The door isn't locked."

But Jenkins battered the door down, then stooped and retrieved a bright object from the floor.

"Here's the key," he mused. "Must have fell out while I was breaking down the door."

He trotted down the hall and called back, "Next time don't go eating firecrackers in bed."

Bill sank down on the ruined bed, speechless with rage. It was a fine way to start the day.

"This burns me up," he said.

"Me too!"

The voice came from under the charred bed. Bill blinked and stared down. A haggard figure now crawled out from below.

"Sorry about the fire," said the little man.

Bill recognized the amateur magician from yesterday morning—Archie the Archfiend.

"What are you doing in my room?" he raged.

"Hiding," whispered Archie. "I had to see you, so I came to your room last night. You weren't here and I waited around. Then I heard noises and I was afraid, so I crawled under the bed. Guess I fell asleep waiting."

"And the fire?"

"It's a curse probably."

"Curse?"

"L. Dritch is out to kill me. Undoubtedly he wove a spell around me that would make me burst into flames. Tried to give me the supernatural hotfoot, understand?"

"I don't understand. Why should L. Dritch want to kill you?" Bill asked. "I thought you were a friend of his."

"I was," sighed Archie the Archfiend, taking a chair. "Until I found out what he was up to. When he invited me to join him at this hotel I didn't realize what he meant to do." Archie rifled his hands through his carrotty hair. "Then he told me and I refused to get in the act, so he cursed me. I had to hide out and I wanted to warn you. You see, I don't mind a little hell-raising now and then, but big hell-raising—that's another story!"

"Hell-raising?"

"HERE'S THE deal. I guess you figured out by now that **L.** Dritch is a real sorcerer. Dabbles in Black Magic. Dabbles? He practically wallows in it. An old friend of Black Art, the magician. You know him?"

"Uh-uh."

"You're lucky. Anyway, L. Dritch is a wizard. He sold his soul to the Devil years ago, and if you ask me, the Devil got himself a rotten bargain when he took it. But in return the Devil gave L. Dritch all kinds of magical power—to cast spells,

work enchantments, call up demons and reverse the charges. Stuff like that. And all L. Dritch had to do in return to keep the pact alive, and himself alive too was to hold a sort of Witches' Sabbath once a year on Hallowe'en.

"As long as he did this he wouldn't die. And our old bearded friend also found out he wasn't the only one who had made the same deal with Satan. There are others in the world, lots of others. Some of them have been around for a long long time—never dying and always remembering to have their little Hallowe'en Party on schedule. L. Dritch got chummy with a lot of them on Witches' Sabbaths in the past. Most of them, you know, are held out on lonely mountain-tops in the deep woods, where it's dark and quiet."

"How do you know so much about all this?" Bill demanded.
"Did you sell your soul to the Devil, too?"

"Nah," protested Archie the Archfiend, hastily. "I just rented it to him. Sort of a five-year contract, with options. I only deal in small magic, like the trick I pulled this morning. You see, I just wanted the power to be a real magician and show up those stage phonies. Always been crazy about it since I was a little fella, just knee-high to a skeleton. I wouldn't sell my soul outright—why that would be dishonest!"

"Glad to hear it," Bill observed. "But L. Dritch—?"

"He's wicked. He has all kinds of power. Raising the dead, turning people to stone, finding free downtown parking places—big stuff like that. So all the other damned souls respect him like a leader. And he met plenty of them on other Hallowe'ens—witches and warlocks and vampires and ghouls and werewolves—"

"But what are they doing in the Hotel Flopmoor if they meet on lonely mountain-tops?"

"That's the big idea L. Dritch came up with. Last year he sort of stopped in at the Magician's Convention to get a few laughs and he suddenly came up with this bright notion.

"Way he figured it, why should he and his supernatural side-kicks have to dance around in the cold night air way out in some deserted spot in the country when they could all hold their Black Sabbath inside a nice warm, bright, modern air-conditioned hotel—with plenty to eat and drink, room service, and everything? Since the Magicians hold a Masked Ball, all these witches and vampires might get away with it as if they were only wearing costumes. They could mingle with the regular guests and nobody would notice. Besides, with all the hotel guests

around, there wouldn't be any trouble finding a human sacrifice or two."

"Sounds sensible to me," agreed Bill. Then, "What am I saying? It's madness!"

"That's what I told him," Archie the Archfiend nodded. "And he got sore at me. Then, when I wouldn't have any part of his other plan, he cursed me."

"What other plan?"

"Well, at these Witches' Sabbaths they do all sorts of things. It's kind of hard for me to remember because I haven't been to one since my Ma took me when I was a little boy. But anyhow, one of the things they have to do is summon up the Devil and a bunch of fiends."

"This is difficult?" Bill asked.

"Hard as hell. Because hell is where they come from. It takes a lot of dancing and chanting and praying, and they burn incense and raise a awful stink—the whole thing is a mess. So L. Dritch figured another way."

"What way?"

"Well, he has magic powers. And your hotel has elevators." "So?"

"He's going to put the two together, that's all. This morning, when most of the guests are out for the day. L. Dritch and his fiend friends are going to use their magical arts to take one of your elevators and dig a shaft below it that runs down to Hell."

"Hell, you say?"

"Hell, I do. They'll run an elevator to Hell and bring back a crew of imps and demons on it for the Hallowe'en Night celebration."

"But they can't do this!"

"That's what I told them. Said I wanted no part of it and L. Dritch said I was a heel and cursed me. And they're going to do it—today."

"Come on," panted Bill, panting and shirting himself quickly. "Let's find the others. We've got to put a stop to this!"

"Yes," added Archie the Archfiend "Before all Hell breaks loose!"

MR. L. DRITCH was entertaining guests in his suite—if you can call it entertainment to watch a hirsute wizard combing his beard with a small gardener's rake.

There were other bearded men in the room, and several bearded women. There was also a shaggy wolf, a thin old man in a peaked cap and a robe covered with cabalistic designs and moth-holes.

Dritch regarded the company from behind his hairy barricade and started to call the roll.

"Cagliostro?"

"Present."

"Monsieur le Comte de St. Germain?"

"Oui."

"Merlin?"

"Prithee, I am indeed in attendance, I wot."

"You what?"

"I wot, that's what."

"Oh." Mr. Dritch identified various and sundry witches, hags, crones, bel-dames, enchantresses and sorceresses, plus a number of necromancers and Mr. W. Wolf, who was busily gnawing open a can of dog-food. All responded to the roll-call.

"Then we're ready for action," Dritch announced. "But wait a minute—where's Pseudo W. Nym?"

As his name was spoken, the cloaked figure glided into the room. "Sorry to be late, boss," said the vampire. "I just went out for a bite."

"Well, time is short," snapped L. Dritch, testily. "We have much to do." He turned to the witches and smirked. "You girls are ready?" he asked.

"Ready," croaked the eldest of the crones, stroking her horrid little familiar. Mr. Dritch regarded the familiar with curiosity. A witch's familiar, of course, is a tiny demon sent by Satan to attend her—usually a cat, rat, bat, weasel or goat. But this particular familiar was most unfamiliar; it was a mole, and it had moles.

"We're supposed to prepare the Grand Ballroom, eh?" rasped the witch. "Sweep it out with our brooms, and place the herbs on the altar. Then we're to sprinkle the walls with fresh blood."

"I'll help you," promised Pseudo W. Nym, quickly. Mr. Dritch wagged a finger at the vampire.

"Uh-uh," he said. "You'd be snitching a taste all the time. I know you, my carnivorous chum. You've got other work to do. Guard the Ballroom doors with the wolf, here."

He turned to the assembled wizards "As for us, we've got to

dig in and work. And I do mean just that—we're digging that elevator shaft down to Hell."

"But the guests—they'll see us—" objected Cagliostro.

"Mayhap I can cast a spell of invisibility," Merlin offered, with a smirk.

"I've got it planned," assured L. Dritch. "We'll take the big freight and service elevator at the back of the hotel here. It will hold more passengers, and it's out of the way of the guests. Now you know what our plans are. We get down in the shaft, under the car, where we won't be noticed—and then we start working.

"Each of us has mantic power capable of penetrating the earth to a depth of a thousand feet. So we'll take turns in chanting and conjuration. First I shall chant and lower us a thousand feet. Then Merlin. Then Cagliostro. Then St. Germain here, and you others. In that fashion, we should be halfway to Hell before noon, and we ought to reach the Pit by nightfall. Then it should be a simple matter to evocate an elevator shaft which will be merely a continuation of the one now used in the hotel—we'll conjure up ropes and cables and steel guiding rods in a jiffy—send the car down before midnight tonight—and bring up our distinguished guests. What a jolly surprise it's going to be for Beelzebub! What a novel way of bringing the Prince of Darkness to his hour of triumph! I am sure he will reward us handsomely."

"I PRAY naught goeth amiss," Merlin grumbled. "For as ye knowest, should we fail to fulfill our bond with Satan and do not invoke him to our revels ere midnight, we lose our right to eternal life. Full thirteen hundred and thirteen years have I walked this earth—and I have no intent to depart now."

"Thirteen hundred and thirteen years!" marvelled one of the wizened witches. "I should think you'd be mighty tired of living by this time. Why do you want to hang around, anyway?"

"It so happeneth that I am an elderly man," Merlin explained, "and of late years I have come to treasure the boon of radio. I am a loyal fan of that program bight *Portia Faces Life*, and I wish to continue to hear the daily installments."

Even these hardened fiends turned pale at this vile admission by the old wizard.

"Well, Portia will have to face Life without you today," declared L. Dritch, sternly. "We've got work to do. Come,

now, let's get started. It's getting on towards noon already." The little knot of hell's bedlam gathered up broomsticks and trudged off to the ballroom, accompanied by the vampire and the werewolf. Comte de St. Germain minced along behind them, to assist in placing the herbs. This left Cagliostro, Merlin, Mr. L. Dritch, and two minor wizards named Carelton Doppleganger and Dead Ernest.

"I guess we're all familiar with the Ritual of Penetrability," Dritch told them. "First finger of left hand extended downwards, Lord's Prayer backwards, then into Latin—the Vulgate version of Chant 33 from *A Child's Garden of Curses*. I don't want any slip-ups . . . nobody is going to raise a lot of dust and dirt, and we'll have to watch out if we strike water . . . this whole thing must be done scientifically. Now, let's synchronize our watches."

They were carefully adjusting their chronometers when the door opened and a group of determined figures catapulted into the room.

There was Marmaduke Hicks, Tubby, Annabel and a grim-faced Bill, followed by the house detective.

"Sorry," Bill said stiff-lipped. "I'm afraid as manager of this hotel I'll have to ask you folks to pack up and leave immediately."

"Leave? But that's impossible. We're here for the Convention," purred Mr. Dritch, suavely. "Have you any reason to complain of our presence here?"

"That wolf," said the house detective. "And those women stealing brooms, and the guy in the deepfreeze, and—"

"You know what Conventions are like," chuckled L. Dritch, deftly shutting the door. "Boys will be boisterous, and all that sort of thing. Surely a few minor cut-ups don't bother you."

"If you mean that minor cut-up who sawed a woman in half, such things do bother us." Bill replied. "There's no use arguing you'll have to go. And at once."

"But this puts us in an awful hole," Dritch shrugged, still unperturbed. "I can see there is only one solution."

"And what's that?"

"To put you in an awful hole, too. I'm speaking of a grave." Mr. Dritch suddenly waggled his beard hideously and lunged at the young man.

"No you don't!" yelled the house detective, producing a revolver. "Stand back or I'll shoot!"

BUT L. DRITCH continued to advance. The maddened house detective raised the revolver, aimed it, and fired. At this close range, point-blank, he couldn't miss. The bullet struck L. Dritch squarely between the eyes—and bounced off.

"Yow!" screeched Tubby. "Here they come!"

And they came. The five wizards raced towards them in a flying phalanx, and in a moment the room was a melee. But only for a moment. For the magicians mumbled as they moved, and the eyes of Cagliostro wove a hypnotic web.

Bill tried to strangle L. Dritch in his own beard. Hicks and Tubby grappled with Merlin. Annabel and the house detective scrabbled at Doppel ganger and Dead Ernest. But Cagliostro's evil eye rested lightly on each in turn, and in a few seconds the five humans were standing stone-still, in statuesque immobility.

"Got them," Cagliostro breathed.

"All right, let's strike 'em dead!" croaked Dead Ernest. "I'll go up on the roof-garden and dig some graves. Lots of nice flowers up there, too. We can have a lovely funeral."

The little necrophile regarded Annabel with avid eyes. "I'll be glad to handle all the arrangements," he offered.

"Not now." L. Dritch raised a restraining hand. "We've got to dig that elevator shaft; no time for graves. I'll need the girl."

"What for?" rasped Merlin.

"For tonight. Surely you haven't forgotten that we'll want a human sacrifice. Why, she's made to order!"

"And the rest of them?"

"We'll leave them here. They can't move a muscle until Cagliostro releases them. Perfectly safe—and from now on we can't afford to arouse suspicion from the guests. I don't want five bodies laying around in this room or anywhere else in the hotel. There'll be plenty of that this evening."

He moved towards the door, his beard sweeping a path before him. "Come on," he commanded. "Let's start digging. Merlin, you'd better stay here and keep an eye on them."

"But I wouldst assist thee—" protested the ancient magician.

"Cheer up," Mr. Dritch soothed. "Be a good boy, and tonight I'll let you go to Hell."

Mr. L. Dritch, beard, and company left the room. Merlin sighed, selected a cigar from a humidor, and struck a match on a portion of Tubby's anatomy.

It looked like the end.



Chapter 13

FOR HOURS the five frantic figures stood stock-still in L. Dritch's room, guarded by the ancient mage, Merlin. Alert, alive, anguished, but unable to move a muscle, the human statues felt minutes melt away. Helplessly, hopelessly, they waited.

Waited and wondered—about the hotel, the Convention, the witches, the wizards working in the shaft beneath the elevator. They fretted, they fulminated, they feared, but made no movement except for the ceaseless susurration of their breathing.

Meanwhile, for others, life went on.

Mr. Oswald Pratt and his fellow-Conventioneers were gaily touring New York in chartered sight-seeing busses. They lunched well and ended the afternoon in a tour of a large brewery. By the time darkness fell, several of the magicians were ready to follow suit. They prepared to lurch back to the hotel for the Grand Hallowe'en Ball.

Other hotel guests went about their accustomed or unaccustomed ways. There was nothing out of the ordinary left to disturb them. Archie the Archfiend had departed from the Flop-

moor after telling Bill of the plans afoot for the evening. He fled hastily, fearing the wrath of L. Dritch, but he took with him the two halves of the woman he had so disastrously divided; promising her to put her together again as good as new once he had time to study the proper invocation. "I guarantee it," he told her, stifling her protests. "I'm not one to do things by halves, you know."

With the torso gone, and the various evil-doers occupied in doing their evil elsewhere, the hotel guests noticed nothing wrong. No wolves loped the corridors, no bodies filled the deep-freeze. Doormen summoned cabs, bellboys fronted and centred, waiters waited normally enough.

Upstairs in the Grand Ballroom, the hags haggled their way through the preparations for the Black Sabbath. While the wolf and the cloaked figure guarded the door against intrusion, the crones groaned as they raised an altar, spread foul-smelling herbs about, and sprinkled the walls and floor with chicken-blood.

"Hustle it up, girls," commanded the eldest witch. "We got to git ready. Looks like there'll be a hot time in the old town tonight."

And in the black bowels of the elevator shaft, four sinister figures gestured and intoned, chanted and scrabbled at the noisome air. Steeped in darkness, they droned and descended, tunnelling their way into the earth at regular intervals—dropping down, down, down.

Each completed a ritual in turn, lowering them further and further until they were drowned in darkness. The shaft sank straight, mile after mile. There was no stopping, no rest, no diversion—save for a brief sensation at around twilight, when Carleton Doppleganger completed an incantation and they sank another thousand feet into a gushing fluid that spurted upwards in a cloying cascade.

"We're rich, fellas!" he shouted. "Rich!"

"What's all this?" demanded L. Dritch, crossly.

"Don't you understand? We've struck oil!"

BUT L. DRITCH was not impressed. Hastily he chanted anew, sinking them down beneath the level of the gusher. "No time for that now," he exhorted. "We must hurry and prepare for the coming of Satan. He will reward our zeal."



And so they burrowed in the blackness, burrowed incredible depths to unfathomable pits; burrowed until the stench of brimstone and boiling lava issued from the very center of the earth. And then the crust gave way and they clung to the sides of the pit while gazing down at a blazing core of fire.

"Hell!" exulted Dritch. "We made it!"

"Now what?" asked Cagliostro. "Do we walk through the fire and ask to see the Boss?"

"We'll be burned to a crisp," wailed Dead Ernest, gazing down at the crimson chaos of Hades below.

"Nonsense," Mr. Dritch told them. "We don't even try to get past those flames like this. That's why we've got the elevator. We go right back up again, using Formula 819, the one for Levitation. It's much faster. And as we go, we try 622—Fabrication of Metallic Objects. To reproduce the elevator shaft here all the way along the pit. And the cables. I've retained a visualization of the construction—I can imagine the correct design, and the Formula will do the rest. Once we reach the top, we wait for the proper moment and then we'll get up a welcoming committee and go down to blazes together."

"The elevator will take us safely through the flames—our speed will keep us from burning or melting the cage—and we can step out and surprise the Old Boy himself. Won't he be thrilled when we invite him to come up and join in the fun?"

"Fun," cackled Dead Ernest. "It's going to be lots of fun, with that human sacrifice of ours. What a dame! One look at her and I sort of forget who I am."

"I'm weary," sighed Doppleganger. "This has taken quite a toll of all of us. Let's hurry, so we can renew our pact tonight. I long for new youth and vigour."

"Me too," Ernest agreed. "Whatta dish that dame is—"

"Formula 819," Mr. Dritch commanded, sternly. "Come on, everybody. Up we go. It's hot as Hell down here, if you'll pardon the expression."

Gesturing and chanting, the wizards worked their way back up the shaft. Elevator cables and steel beams blossomed behind them, and the shaft shook and shuddered at the evocation of material force. Ions unnaturally altered, electrons wrenched from their orbits, atoms energized with unholy abandon, all merged and coalesced into an appearance of actuality. The elevator shaft to Hell was complete.

IT WAS dark in L. Dritch's room. Merlin the Magician turned on a light, but the living statues didn't even blink. Bill and Annabel, Hicks, Tubby and the house detective had been standing still for so long that Merlin was completely accustomed to their supernatural stasis. The old goetist puttered around as though oblivious to their presence, pausing only to dust the friends from time to time. He seemed to do a most thorough job on Annabel.

The friends regarded him helplessly as he doddered and pottered about, singing blasphemous madrigals under his breath in a cracked voice. Obviously he was practising for tonight's ceremonies.

"One-two, tear him in two

"Three-four, sprinkle with gore,"

sang the wizard, as he opened up an old portmanteau and dumped a pile of bones on the bed, which he proceeded to sort.

"Five-six, poke his eyes out with sticks,

"Seven-eight, put his brains on a plate,"

hummed Merlin, rummaging around under the bed until he located a human skull (dolichocephalic) which he added to the disarticulated array on the counterpane.

"Nine, ten—"

began the thaumaturge, but was interrupted by a resounding rapping on the door.

Before Merlin could summon the strength to shuffle over and turn the key in the lock, the door swung open and in marched Susan Foster and Mrs. Pratt. Both of the blondes caught sight of their friends simultaneously, but neither of them batted more than .ooo in the Eyelash League.

Bill tried desperately to make some sound or sign, but the women didn't offer even a down-payment of attention. They greeted Merlin effusively.

"Oh, there you are!" gushed Susan Foster. "We've been looking all over for you."

"Yes, we've gone from room to room for hours," Dorothy Pratt added.

"Looking for me?" Merlin was genuinely astonished. "But why, prithee?"

"Dorothy," corrected Mrs. Pratt.

"We'd heard so much about you," Susan Foster continued. "We felt we simply had to meet you. What in the world are you doing?"

Merlin indicated the jumble of bones on the bed. "Just inspecting some old souvenirs," he said. "If it pleaseth you ladies."

"It don't pleaseth me none," murmured Susan Foster. She turned and regarded the enchanted friends. "But what have we here—statues?"

"Nay, they are but hapless wights laboring beneath a mighty rune that binds them to the spot, ensorcelled," Merlin explained. He peered suspiciously at the two blondes. "But why dost thou inquire, and what is the reason ye seek me out?"

"Oh," simpered Dorothy Pratt, "everybody in the hotel is talking about the fake magician up here and we wanted to see for ourselves what you looked like."

"Fake?" cried Merlin. "Ye imply I am a charlatan, a fraud, an imposter, a deceitful humbug?"

"Couldn't have said it better myself."

"But I am the mighty Merlin!"

"Mighty like a rose," sneered Susan Foster. "I'll bet you're just another Hallowe'en masquerader like all the rest."

MERLIN frowned. The girls had divined his weak spot—pride. He would show these intruders a thing or two. Accordingly he reached a skinny hand into empty air and drew forth a pack of cards. Approaching Susan Foster he extended the deck invitingly.

"Pick a card," he murmured. "Any card."

Susan did so.

"Is it the king of clubs?" asked Merlin.

"Yes," the girl replied, grabbing the deck. "And so are all the rest of them, you cheap prestidigitator."

Merlin, unabashed, then reached into the loathsome depths of his chinfoliage and triumphantly brought forth a rabbit.

"Behold a hare!" he proclaimed.

"Ugh!" observed Mrs. Pratt. "Hares in his beard."

"Why shouldn't a beard have hairs?" asked Susan Foster, reasonably. But Mrs. Pratt was not convinced.

"My ex-husband could do that," she said. "And he's a fake. Why, he could even pull a rabbit out of a mustache."

"Oh, yea?" Merlin was incensed. "Watch me." He went over to the trunk and pulled out an empty birdcage. Deftly concealing the cage in his fungoid beard for a moment, he brought it back into view—and it now contained a large, passionate-looking

canary.

"Child's play!" Mrs. Pratt jeered. "Now if *you* could get in a bird cage and let the canary make you disappear, that would be a trick."

"Or," continued Susan Foster, innocently, "if you could make these enchanted people come to life—"

"I can," Merlin averred, testily. "Anything Cagliostro doth perform I can achieve."

"Let's see you do it, then."

"Nay. I am not to be tricked thusly. These ones are needed shortly for tonight. I may not release them."

"Oh, you mean for that stupid old sacrifice?" asked Dorothy Pratt. "I heard all about that."

"Will ye attend?" asked Merlin. "I had not recognized ye as a witch."

"Well, I am. And so's my girl-friend, here. Two of the witch-crafiest dames you ever did see. So how about proving to us that you're on the up and up? Let's find out if you can get these statues to move."

"Nay," grumbled Merlin. "Absolutely nay." He stroked his beard. "For such comely damsels I wot it difficult to resist such a request, but I dare not. If my companions should discover it—"

"They won't know!" urged Susan Foster. "Just do it for a minute, so we can see. Then we'll be satisfied, and you can date us up for tonight at the Sabbath."

"Tell you what," added Mrs. Pratt, "you'll have to do it anyway before you sacrifice them, so you might as well let us see. I mean, you're going to feed them first, aren't you? They always feed the condemned a last meal."

"Sure he will." Susan stroked Merlin's beard, almost having a stroke herself as she did so. "Come on, Merly, be a sport. Gee, Dorothy, doesn't he look distinguished? Just like Monty Wolley."

That did it. Merlin smiled and drew himself up to his full four feet ten. "Behold!" he said. "No, wait. I shall permit them to sup, but naught else. Hence, be so good as to order meals and then I shall release them."

Dorothy Pratt stepped to the phone and called room service to order food. Then she and Susan sat back and waited fearfully.

BILL AND his companions shared their fear. The moment the two blondes had gone into their routine it was evident that they were acting according to a preconceived plan to release them. But now, on the verge of success, too many things might go wrong.

It was late. L. Dritch and his fiendish friends might return at any moment to take them to their doom. Merlin could easily become suspicious. And even if they were released to eat, it was doubtful if Bill or the others could defeat the magic of the sorcerer. Despite his senility, he had power.

The bellboy arrived and Susan Foster relieved him of his tray at the door. Dorothy Pratt had never left the wizard's side—in order to make sure that he didn't slip away, she kept a tight hold on his beard: according to her reasoning, a beard in the hand was worth two in the bush.

"Here's the food," Susan reminded the wizard. "Now let's see you do your stuff."

"I like not the looks of this," Merlin reconsidered. "It would go ill with me should any harm befall my prisoners."

"Aw, give them a break," Mrs. Pratt urged. "Look at them, practically starving to death. After all, you want to make a good impression tonight, don't you? What will old John J. Beelzebub say if you show him a bunch of scrawny, emaciated sacrifices? I understand he likes Grade A meat."

Susan Foster got in her barb. "He's just stalling because he doesn't know how. Isn't that so, Merly, you old buzzard?"

"A pox on you!" sniffed the sorcerer. "Behold! I call upon the Powers of Belial, Azaniel, Asreal, Samiel, Seth and Asmodaeus!"

"Sounds like a big advertising agency to me," whispered Dorothy Pratt to her companion.

But no advertising agency, however fiendish, could have provided the response the wizard got for his invocation. For suddenly the darkness of the hotel room was illumined by a reddish glow. A cloud of pungent vapor gathered at the ceiling and then coalesced about the bodies of the enchanted quintet. It whirled around them, enveloping them in smoke, and then disappeared.

With gasps and groans, Bill and his companions moved.

Merlin raised his scrawny arms. "Avaunt!" he called. "By the Powers, ye cannot harm me! Sup, but durst not approach me."

Bill, Annabel, Hicks, Tubby and the house detective obed-

iently walked over to the table and lifted dishes from the tray.

"Thanks, pal," whispered Annabel to Dorothy Pratt. "But where do we go from here?"

"Straight to Hell, if the old geezer has his way," murmured Bill, bitterly.

"Hasten!" Merlin called out. "Before my comrades return to find ye thus released. And please—do not make use of the silverware."

"Silverware? Why not?"

"I had the same complaint in the dining hall of this hostelry yester-eve," Merlin explained. "Tis but a foolish allergy of mine. I dislike contact with aught of silver."

"So I'll eat with my fingers," Tubby agreed. "Who cares? I'm dying for a meal."

"More truth than poetry," Hicks commented. "If the old creep doesn't like silverware, who am I to knife him?"

"Who are you to *what?*" said Bill, almost to himself. Then, "That's right. The legends all say it. The undead can't stand silver. Silver bullets, so why not silver-plated knives and forks and spoons?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Annabel.

"Watch and see," Bill answered. "Here goes."

Scooping a handful of spoons from the table, Bill turned suddenly and flung them at the wizard.

Merlin ducked hastily and cried out. "Cease! A foul mur-rain upon thee! Cease or I—"



Chapter 14

HE RAISED his hands to start a spell, then nearly had one as Bill sailed a fork at his ear.

"Grab the knives," Bill yelled. "He can't stand contact with silver."

Hicks and Tubby acted. Bill sailed silverware at Merlin, who wavered, weaved, and dodged—but not for long.

A clatter of table utensils echoed on the floor, and as Merlin's flesh came into contact with the cold silver, the unnatural life-force ebbed within his wizened frame. There was a single flash of flame, and then—no Merlin.

On the floor rested an empty robe and a tangle of white beard; nothing more. Merlin the magician had retired.

"It worked!" Bill cried. "Come on, everybody!"

"Now where?" Tubby gasped.

"To that service elevator, of course. We've got to stop that crew from going to Hell. And if Merlin could be destroyed with silverware, so can they."

"Pick up the knives and forks and bring them along," commanded Annabel. "Bring the tray, too. We'll serve them something they aren't expecting."

The crew gathered up their culinary weapons quickly, then dashed for the door.

"Down the hall," Hicks panted. "It's after nine. They should be ready to start by now."

From around the corner at the end of the hall they could hear a babble of voices, interspersed with cackles and howls.

"The wolf," Bill guessed. "And those witches. Why the whole crew must be going down as a welcoming committee."

"Got to stop them—" began Tubby. Then, as the little fat man rounded the corner, "Too late!"

The clang of the elevator door told its own story. That plus L. Dritch's triumphant shout of, "Going down!"

With the roar of a rocket-blast, the hell-born crew went hell-borne. The elevator plummeted down before the eyes of Bill and his companions, and with shouts of frustrated rage they tossed silverware into the shaft.

Flames and fumes shot out of the pit as the elevator plunged endlessly into the earth. Whatever the supernatural agency used to build the shaft extension, it was apparent the elevator was traveling at amazing speed. There was a whoosh and a rush and then a dull thud echoed from far off.

"Good heavens, what was that?" asked Annabel.

"It means they're already arrived," Bill told her. "In a moment they ought to be back with their guests."

"Guests?"

"Sure. That crew of demons for the Black Sabbath. Headed by none other than Satan himself."

"And no silverware will stop *him*." Hicks sighed. "Even if we had any, which we haven't any more."

"The cables are moving!" Tubby breathed. "They must be coming up."

"I can't see through the smoke," said Mrs. Pratt. "Let's get out of here—those flames and fumes—" She subsided into a fit of coughing.

"Bill, what can we do?" wailed Annabel.

"Nothing. Get back, all of you," Bill commanded. The party retreated before the smoke billowing from the elevator shaft. Stumbling and lurching, they fled down the corridor as the sound of the rising elevator rose in their ears.

"Here they come!" yelled Hicks. "Every man for himself, now!"

"Bill, where are you?" Annabel stared at the smoke. "Hey,

Bill's gone!"

He was indeed gone. They peered at each other, shuddering at the sounds rising from the shaft. There was a humming and a triumphant howling, like the voices of the damned. And now came a banging and a rattling.

"Goodbye, all," Tubby observed, racing down the hall. The blondes and the house detective followed suit. Hicks hesitated, then took to his heels. Annabel wavered, then plunged into the madness of smoke, flame and sound around the corner.

"Bill, darling, where are you?"

SHE GROPED along the hall. The yammering rose in frenzied pitch and the banging increased in volume. Suddenly the smoke parted and a glare of infernal light shone from the shaft. Annabel caught a single glimpse of the elevator cage rising—caught a glimpse of the wizards, the witches, and an incandescent flashing of fiery red forms. It was just a vague impression of horned heads, gleaming snouts, black scales and lashing pointed tails, of claws reaching out to clutch and talons poised to tear and rend.

Then the smoke rose again, there was a single final crash and the elevator wobbled.

A roar filled Annabel's ears. Something seemed to explode before her eyes, and then there was a rumbling crash that died away in a series of receding echoes.

Bill staggered out of the smoke.

"Darling, are you all right?" gasped the girl.

"Yeah. I guess so."

"But what happened? Where's the elevator?"

"Back in Hell," Bill told her. "And forever. I took a fire-axe and cut the cables."

"But can't L. Dritch conjure up new ones?"

"Not in the midst of a sea of flame he can't," Bill grinned. "They came through fast going down and coming up—but this time they landed long enough. I judge that fire will melt the cage and those wizards in about three seconds. As for the fiends there they are and there they'll stay, forever."

One by one, the fugitives trailed back along the corridor—first Hicks, then Tubby, then the blondes, and finally the house detective.

"Bill saved us," Annabel triumphantly informed them. "Isn't he wonderful?"

The house detective shook his head ruefully. "Mebbe so," he grunted. "But we're cooked, anyway. After what's been going on here the past few days this hotel won't have a customer left by tomorrow morning."

"Afraid he's right," Hicks said "Down the hall those magicians are packing suitcases like crazy. Guess the Flopmoor is ruined forever."

"My uncle won't care," Annabel said. "But after all, he was only the manager. The hotel stockholders will probably sue Bill for all this. Maybe I wasn't so good for you after all, darling." Surprisingly enough, the girl began to sniffle. "Oh, Bill," she sobbed. "I didn't mean to get you into all this trouble."

Bill tilted her head up and smiled at her.

"What do you mean, trouble?" he asked. "This is the luckiest thing that ever happened to me in all my life. And in all your lives. Can't you tell by looking at me?"

Annabel and the others stared at him in bewilderment. At last she found her voice.

"What's so lucky about the way you look?" inquired the girl. "You're just all covered with smoke and grease and—"

"Something else," Bill finished for her. "When I cut those cables and the elevator went down, it *splashed*. Something splashed all over me. Can't you see what it is?"

"It's oil, folks. We don't need a hotel. We're all rich. We've struck oil in that shaft—and it's a gusher!"

Annabel gazed at him tenderly. I've always wanted to marry a millionaire," she said.

"Well, then, what are you waiting for?" Marmaduke Hicks took charge. "Come on, let's dig up a minister tonight and get it over with. Then we can have a nice wedding celebration."

"Not a bad idea." Tubby led them along the hall to the elevator. He pressed the buzzer and the car whizzed up.

"Nothing doing," Bill said. "No more elevators for me. I'm walking down. And another thing—I'm through with all this helling around."

Annabel gave him a long look.

"That's what *you* think," she said.

THE END

The Earthlight Commandos

by

Raymond E. Banks

Fighting the Philosterians was bad enough
for any Star Ship, but when you mixed Yale and
Harvard men on a mission you had real trouble!

I KNEW we were in for trouble when the Old Man came to my bunk and said: "What is Harvard?"

He's a Venusian; he wouldn't be expected to know. "It's a school, a college, or rather a University," I said.

"What's Yale?"

"It's another University."

He shuffled some papers in his hands. "We've been assigned to the Historical Command," he said. "We're going to take out some men from Yale and Harvard."

My wounds weren't healed. But I got off my recuperation bunk at once. A frozen mist seized my nervous system. Strange things have happened on US Star Ships. Many more strange things will continue to happen, I suppose, but I knew on the instant that the Star Office in Washington was up to something more weird than

usual and it had the earmarks of one of those nightmare expeditions.

"When the war with the Philosterians began, all of the ships of the Historical Command were transferred into the Star Battle Fleet," I said. "Now they put our ship into the Historical Command. I don't get it."

"Wait till you see the crew," he said. "Recuperations, all of them. Some without eyes, hands, legs. A few rayed-out ones."

I sat back down on my bunk. I groaned. I stared out of the Moon Hospital window at the gray-green hunk of cheese that was Earth. "Sorry, Captain Meredith. I'm too sick to go on this trip."

He said, "You're a Battle Officer, Evans. You're my Second. When the Star Office ways 'Go'—we go."

He went out.



ILAY there and punched a bell. A corpsman came running. "Take my temperature," I said. "I think I'm going to have a relapse."

"You look fine," he grinned.

"My God, man, they cracked open our ship out in star space. Before that I had been rayed down and I laid in that busted star ship for forty-eight hours before I was picked up—"

"You look fine," he said. "We get you back here to the Moon, we really fix you up. So you can go back and play tag with the Philosterians again."

"Check the leg," I said. "It feels wrong."

He felt it. "Nearly healed, sir. It feels great."

"Those ray effects come back on you," I said. "The Philosterians really rayed the hell out of me. Sometimes I see everything sort of blue-gray."

"A very pretty color, sir, and, incidentally, I heard one of the boys say you were being discharged tomorrow to go back to your old star ship, the *Colossus*."

"Check the name down there, Corpsman. It must be somebody else. Are you sure it says "Battle Officer Don Evans?" The Star Office wouldn't think of sending me out on the *Colossus* again. Not a broken man on a broken ship."

"Oh, you won't see much action

now, sir. You're going out with the Historical Command, they say."

I could see us sitting out in two, three hundred light-year space with a crew of wounded men and a bunch of brains from Yale and Harvard. While a couple of Philosterian star ships came by and not another US Star ship within an Astronomical Unit!

"Corpsman, I'll give you a hundred dollars to break my leg!"

The Corpsman looked doubtful. "Well, sir, we're not supposed to do anything like that, but, of course, Star pay isn't much, not if you get assigned to a quiet spot like the Moon, and I do have children to think of—

I honestly believe the young fool would've broken my leg right then and there if I hadn't jumped up and braced him for being out of uniform. The Star Office assigns all kinds of idiots to the Med Corps. Imagine his nerve!

THE ship was all clean and ready. We were waiting for the men from Harvard and Yale. The entire crew might've mutinied before this, but they were too sick, most of them. It had taken me about fifteen seconds to piece together the top level thinking of the Star Office.

(1) This is an election year.

(2) People are crazy to see

more work from the Historical Command, work suspended due to the Philosterian War. (3) We will send out a junked-up US Star ship, crewed by recuperates, neither ship nor men being capable of battle just now. (4) If the trip succeeds, the Star men will be ready for active duty again and the historians and the public will be happy. (5) If it fails we will be rid of the historians, the crippled men and the crippled ship all in one minor tragedy and there will be no more pressure to reactivate the Historical Command. (6) It will be especially edifying to mix Yale and Harvard historians on this trip, seeing how they hate each other.

"Here they come!"

Two Moon taxis pulled up. The entire crew of the *Colossus* peered out at the sight of eight distinguished looking gentlemen disembarking, four from each cab. There was a certain amount of surprise evidenced between the two groups, for, naturally, the Star Office hadn't bothered to inform the Yale men of the Harvard men, or the Harvard men of the Yale men.

"Dr. Alford of Yale," I murmured. "Dr. Belmont of Harvard."

"Friends?" asked Captain Meredith.

I held onto his sleeve to steady

myself. "Not exactly," I said. "Once Alford sued Belmont for half a million dollars. Once Belmont chased Alford up Beacon Street and succeeded in cracking open his skull with an umbrella. They both lay claim to inventing earthlight photography. It'll be interesting to see which one survives the trip."

"Don't be silly, Evans," said Meredith.

I looked at Meredith closely. Venusians don't understand these things. They are a hard, unbending and stoic people. They're the true pioneer sons of the first earthmen to land on Venus. They are of earth ancestry but inside they're stainless steel and flint shavings.

"All will be well," said Meredith.

"The earthmen of Venus have produced thousands of bold soldiers and adventurers, but you haven't produced a Professor of History yet—they're a different breed of men," I said.

Meredith sniffed.

The college people started aboard.

THE trouble didn't start once they got aboard. It started while they were still coming up the gangplank. Dr. Belmont of Harvard was a portly gentleman. Alford of Yale was a slight wisp of a man. They were both trying to

keep their dignity and yet be the first aboard to get the best quarters. They tried not to run. But, God, how they could walk!

The two men became stuck in the narrow gangplank and stood there glaring at each other.

"They're stuck," I said.

"Go unstick them, Second."

There was a sound. A roaring like a bull elephant and an angry squeaking like a mouse. Above it I turned to the Third.

"Go unstick the gentlemen, please, Third."

He gave me an angry look and hobbled off on his aluminum crutches. At that moment they broke loose and came pelting up the gangplank. My poor Third on his crutches never had a chance. One of the flying crutches struck Captain Meredith in the chest. He never blinked.

Belmont and Alford presented their papers with a show of dignity and both demanded the Best Technician's quarters.

"Gentlemen, there is only one Best Technician's quarters," said Captain Meredith. He pulled out a coin. "Call it, heads or tails."

Alford, a small blond man, sniffed. "Indeed, sir," he said, "I never gamble."

"Ridiculous," grunted Belmont. "I suppose I can stand making a trip on a murderous old tub like this, but I don't expect to have

my cabin chosen by the turn of a coin. I'm afraid the Star Office will have to do better, Captain."

"There's no time to contact the Star Office," said Meredith. I thought there was a peculiar glint in his eye when he turned to me. "Show them both to the Best Technician's quarters, Second."

They protested, but Captain Meredith was looking past them to the distant spot where the air dome of the Moon ended.

"This way, gentlemen," I said.

I turned to lead. I heard a sucking of breaths.

"What," said Belmont, "in the name of God are these people doing here?"

"Wounded men come to see us off," said Alford.

The entire crew was drawn up for the boarding ceremony. Out of the corner of my eye I saw one man retching over the side, a rayed-out effect. The rest looked fairly beat up. There was a hovering smell of liniment, ointments, castor oil and vitamins.

"That's the crew," said Captain Meredith.

Belmont gave a roar. "I will not consent to this farce!"

Meredith said nothing.

"Better you didn't," said Alford, giving an anxious, nervous dance. "Better you didn't," Belmont. Much below you. Much below Harvard, on the whole. Sec-

ond, lead me to quarters.

Belmont sighed. There was a feeble clatter as my Third picked up his crutches. The crew, the Captain, everybody looked at Belmont. We were praying that he'd stalk off the ship. Unfortunately Alford gave him a tiny shove towards the gangplank.

Belmont's jaw clamped. I've seen atomics go off with less finality.

"Well, Bon Voyage it is," he said. "Lead on, Second."

WE put them in quarters, fired up and were off. Actually I wasn't too worried about the voyage itself. You don't have to be very active physically to run a US Star ship.

In peacetime.

In wartime it's different. If we ever met a Philosterian ship, we were finished. The blue rays didn't stop 'em. The atomic pellets didn't stop 'em. Bullets would barely stop 'em if you used a lot. The long rays would stop them all right, but if they ever grappled with a US Star ship they usually won. They came aboard. They went through the ship. They killed. They were not of earth. There was no communication, no prisoners, no understandable meanings for earthman and Philosterians. Hardly any hate. They killed, we killed, though it was extremely

hard to kill them compared to the ease with which they killed us. They wanted all they could get of our galaxy, the Milky Way. They uprooted our colonies and left them lifeless and desolate. We could've lived together with them in peace. God knows there was room out there. But they didn't want it that way.

A buzzer sounded. I got to know that buzzer. It was a "Beep" followed by an angry spurt of "beeps" that ended in a steady burrrr . . .

Alford and Belmont were both set up in the Best Technician's quarters. They'd halved the room by putting up a wooden screen in the middle. Yale had the shower, Harvard had the toilet. There were glares whenever the line was crossed.

"Where are the photographers?" asked Dr. Belmont when I got to the Best Technician's quarters.

"Below, sir. They arrived the day before you did."

"Which are assigned to me?"

"Uh—there're only twelve, sir. Only one set."

"Only twelve photographers? Ridiculous, man!"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"Are any of them Harvard men?"

"I don't know, sir. I will ask."

"God help us if they are!" came a wispy voice from the Yale

side.

Belmont stood up and stared over the screen. He had Alford at a disadvantage there, for the small man couldn't look over the screen.

"If you must talk, sir," said Belmont, "talk in your own air. I won't have my air talked in by a Yale man."

"Come to think of it," said Alford, his sharp, brown eyes cutting into the angry blue ones of Belmont, "I don't care much for Harvard pipesmoke in my Yale air. A Yale man is a gentleman and he wouldn't dream of smoking without permission."

"Well, sir, I wouldn't dream of offending New Haven nostrils!" cried Belmont, dashing his pipe to the floor. It broke into small pieces.

Alford shot out a small Old Eli toe and whisked the pipe fragments back on the Cambridge side. "I'm very much afraid you're ignoring the line, sir," he said calmly.

Belmont stamped on the fragments. "At Harvard, Mr. Evans," he said, "we have a saying 'God created man and the earth in six days and the Devil created Yale in the middle of the night.'"

"Several centuries ahead of Harvard, then, at any rate," said Alford. "On the whole, quite alert down in New Haven."

"See here, Alford!" cried Belmont. "Let's put this silly tosh to one side. We've got serious problems. That ridiculous Star Office has sent us out on a historical expedition with only one set of photographers between us. We shall have to divide them."

"You cannot make a decent set with only six photographers," said Alford.

"I won't have my photographers working your sets, Dr. Alford!"

"Oh, come off the stew, Dr. Belmont. Alternate days, alternate weeks, alternate sets. It's all very simple. A Yale man can always make do. All I ask is the same breaks as you get."

Belmont whirled on me.

"How many darkrooms?"

"One, sir."

"How many camera bubbles?"

"Six, sir."

"How many Momsen Prisms?"

"One, sir."

"You can readily see," said Alford, "that we're going to have to share, Belmont. Might as well be friends."

He offered his hand. Belmont stared at it and then a crafty light gleamed in his eye. "Properly so, Alford," he said shaking, "properly so."

I looked at them. Alford's eyes had a look of concealed delight. Belmont was playing crafty. The real nasty in-fighting under the

flag of truce was about to take place.

"Excuse me," I said, "That's my buzzer."

"**H**OW does it happen," said Meredith when I hit the Captain's cabin, "that we have 1200 pounds of luggage over the allowance?"

"It must be the good Doctors," I said.

"Go down in the hold," said Meredith. "Look at the stuff. If it isn't food, throw it overboard."

I hurried down to the hold. But the good Doctors were there before me, unpacking their luggage.

Just a moment, please, gentlemen," I said. I turned to Alford. "What is that?"

Alford flushed a little. "My bows and arrows."

"You're going to take bows and arrows out into light-year space?"

"A hobby, Evans. Relaxation. Mild physical exercise to keep the mind churning."

"Down at Yale," chuckled Belmont, "they don't put much faith in new-fangled weapons such as musket-and-ball, swords and hand-loaded pistols."

"Hobby," insisted Alford. "Just relaxation."

"Sir," I said to Dr. Belmont. "What is that?"

He had a chair. It was a fine Captain's chair of black wood with

an insignia on the back.

"This is a chair from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

It was a beautiful piece of furniture, but it didn't seem to fit in a US Star ship. I told him so.

"Now, Second," he said. "You mustn't go on so. I've done some of the best thinking of my life in this chair. I worked out many of the details of earthlight photography sitting in this chair. You may call it idiosyncrasy if you like."

"You stole the chair from MIT," said Alford. "You stole earthlight photography from Yale."

"Come, Alford. I'll admit you were strong on theory. But it takes a practical man to work out details. I did that. I brought back the first practical historical sequences from space. But for me, earthlight photography would only be a few lines in one of your ridiculous books."

"Gentlemen, please," I said. "All of this junk has got to be thrown overboard. Captain's orders."

They both glared at me. They both protested that on their own Star ships before the war they'd carried twice the amount of books and documents. That they had severely limited themselves for this trip, only going over the allowance a mere six hundred pounds apiece. In the end they carried

the argument to Captain Meredith. I can still see him sitting at his desk, his head swiveling from Belmont to Alford and back to Belmont again. They threatened him with some big names from the Star Office. In the end he said:

"Very well. You may store the stuff in the aft baggage hold. See to it, Second."

There was no aft baggage hold and I was puzzled until I saw the crew, under the careful supervision of the Doctors storing all of the stuff in the deceleration burner. The crew thought the two men were crazy, but Dr. Belmont went around tapping the shiny alloy walls with his fingers and remarking to Alford that it was an excellent storage space, well-insulated from the heat and cold variations of space.

After it was carefully stored and covered and tied down we retired for the "night." Sometime during the night the ship gave a jerk while Meredith used those decelerators for a five second blast. The next day the tube was shiny—and empty. Meredith was apologetic, placing the blame vaguely between myself and the crew. For the loss of a great many books and documents neither of the two historians ever completely forgave me. My only defense was to point out that Alford had saved his bows and arrows and Belmont his

chair from MIT which had already been taken to the Best Technician's quarters.

WE were in deep light-year space. Almost four hundred light years out. We were making a historical set. It was Belmont's day to have the earth-light photography crew and he had made the first strike. He had picked up the English Army somewhere in the Maryland-Virginia area and was trying to get George Washington.

The camera bubbles were out—all six of them. Syd Nelson, Belmont's Chief Photog, was directing the action. The camera bubbles were feeding us pictures like a TV camera feeds a control room back home. Their viewers picked up earthlight that had left the earth nearly four hundred years ago. The massive Momsen Prism cut that earthlight into layers, resolving the reflected sun glitter from earth into its components. You could see people moving, moving around on the earth of the mid-1700's. Light from the sun, hitting the earth, touching every tree, blade of grass, human face, human hand. Indestructible photons of reflected light emanated from earth, carrying the total components of every single second of earth history. Out here in space we had traveled

faster than light and caught up with those ancient rays. We were breaking them down into people and places, into history, into meaning.

It was an awe-inspiring sight and most of the men crowded into the Monitor's room to watch the work.

"Turtle Creek, 1755!" exulted Belmont. "I think we'll catch Washington now!" He was especially happy because Alford had come back with the first film strips of Lincoln. Now it was his turn.

Suddenly he cried out. "Camera Four. Stop panning! Closeup! There! That man standing apart by the tree.

We watched the shadowy picture loom up large on the monitor. The Prism turned and swayed, electronically focussing. The head became clear, undoubtedly that of George Washington, saying something to one of his men. The face was recognizable though different from the idealized picture we are used to. After all, this was young Washington with the British Army of Braddock in the French-and-Indian War.

"Cameras One, Two and Three. Get angles. Shift. Longs and shorts. Hurry. . . ."

Belmont stood in the middle of the floor like a conductor directing an orchestra. Syd Nelson was

calling the technical information to match Belmont's orders softly to the cameramen over his hand microphone. Dr. Macready, Belmont's mathematician, spun his computers eagerly and the Researcher called out information to him on the time of day, probable weather, and so on. The big Star ship jockeyed to pick up the scene on its own viewer for then we could get an additional angle into the printer.

Washington's head went out of focus and slid off the screen.

"Re-calculate," snapped Belmont to Macready, the mathematician. "The earth's rotating, you know. Quickly. New figures, please."

Macready sweated at it. With a groan of impatience, Belmont stalked over to the Caller who was connected to the engine room. He snatched the microphone and called out his own computations, straight out of his head. The ship began to move. Washington's head slid back into focus again.

"Print!" ordered Belmont, and the equipment began to print the picture, with Belmont reaching a peak of excitement, tearing at his tie, calling to the cameramen, crying for new computations and correcting the ship's movements.

One, two minutes passed.

"God," whispered the Third to me at my shoulder. "They're go-

ing into action. We're actually going to see young George Washington under fire!"

It was a thrilling moment. The soldiers of the 22nd Century stood, mouths agape at the sight of this far-off, long-forgotten battle. The skill of Belmont, his instinctual shifts and movements of the equipment washed out in a very few seconds the contempt that the Star men had had for the academicians. Even Captain Meredith stood by the door, staring, his face stoic as usual, but for once impressed by what was going on. To him our history meant nothing because Venus was his home planet, and yet the importance of the moment held him.

"Big stuff back on earth?" he asked me.

"Before the war," I said, "Earthlight history was the biggest thrill of three centuries. They got the Spanish American War. They got Lincoln at the Second Inaugural. They got US Grant in Mexico City in 1846. They even got back to the American Revolution. Belmont and Alford were two of the most famous men on earth. The TV stations paid millions to show the films and money poured into the colleges like water. That's when the Historical Command was formed. There were five or six ships, but Alford and Belmont got almost all

of the good stuff. History books sold like hotcakes. The—"

At that moment the general alarm sounded. Philosterians within range!

DESPITE the crippled condition of the crew, the Monitor room emptied in seconds. The camera bubbles with the two-man photographer crews were rudely jerked back in by power beams and the Monitoring room crew began to stash and stow for "Secure".

Belmont gave a mighty roar of frustration and sat in the middle of the floor and pounded the deck with anger. "My first Washington!" he cried. "My first god-dam Washington, completely ruined. I say fie! I say goddamnit fie!"

That's the last I heard. I had places to go. Things to do. The crew of the COLOSSUS was ready for action in ten minutes, only four minutes over what a completely healthy crew on a US Star ship of the line could do.

Then suddenly we sat there in silence. I was in the Battle Plans Room at my position when Captain Meredith came in on the closed circuit TV.

"By the way," he said drily, "why are we at battle stations, Second? The scanners don't show any hostile ships. The alarm was

tripped by someone inside the ship, manually."

We looked at each other. "Where's Alford?" I said.

"Find him," said Meredith.

I found him in the Best Technician's quarters, smacking his lips over a glass of orange juice.

"Well," he said, his eyes innocently brown, "I did trip a bell, Second. I wanted the galley to bring up the afternoon orange juice. Have to swill the stuff for my health, you know. Perhaps I did jangle the wrong bell. But don't apologize. I finally went down and poured it myself."

That left me speechless. At that moment Dr. Belmont arrived in a burning wrath and Alford took his bows and arrows and sneaked off to the Enlisted Men's Recreation Quarters, leaving me to face the inundation of Belmont's fury which I could in no way stem.

I had barely survived that when Captain Meredith summoned me to cook me on *his* front burner.

"It is the office of the Second in command to maintain proper rules and regulations for the conduct of the supercargoes," he said. "Any more false alarms like that, Second, and you'll find yourself back as Mess Officer, Evans. And, furthermore—*

"Yessir," I said sadly.

I knew that Belmont would be laying for Alford on *his* set and

I determined that there'd be no more false alarms. I went down to Tools and got the biggest pair of wire-cutters I could find . . .

TWO days later Belmont's time was up and he turned the photography crew over to Alford with something less than good grace. A day after that, Alford made his first strike.

Most of the crew centered in the Monitor Room because they'd not seen much of earthlight historical photography, and Alford put on a good show for them.

"Notice that the cameras are spread in a convex arc over many thousand miles of space," he said. "They pass the rays of light along to a focal center, this Monitor Room. Actually, the cameras in the camera bubbles are secondary —just in case a photographer has a specially good angle. The real job of the bubbles is to concentrate the light for us. At this great distance from earth the quanta of light are vastly dispersed and very weak, and so it takes all of the skill of the camera bubbles, the mathematicians, researchers and Momsen Prism men to get a meaningful picture for the Printer.

"Notice also that we can only pick up exterior scenes. Unfortunately we cannot go inside buildings. It is as if we were hovering in a helicopter, fifty to one

hundred feet above the ground on earth taking pictures at a desirable angle with telescopic lenses. And yet it is enough. We can bring back battles, pageants, parades and outdoor speeches, void of sound which dies within the earth's atmosphere, and get enough direct results to identify and explain most of the important figures in human history, not to mention a wealth of heretofore lost detail."

Alford had a battle on the screen now. It was the early settlers of America against the Indians. The distance shown on the general tabulator placed it back about the late sixteenth century.

"Gentlemen," said Alford, "you are witnessing a prime moment in American history. I suspect that this is the famous Roanoke Island Colony of Sir Walter Raleigh's. It was left in this Virginia location in 1587. Later, in 1591, when supply ships returned, the entire colony had disappeared and to this day no one knows what happened to them, although Indian aggression was the logical answer. Now we shall see whether we can solve one of history's great enigmas."

Belmont was the showman—Alford was the intense scholar. His voice got shaky, his face white. He began calling out instructions to his camera bubbles which jockeyed for positions. An enormously clear picture of the battle ap-

peared on the monitor wall and the Momsen Prism man rolled us right into the thick of the battle.

"Did ever a finer horse opera come out of Hollywood?" asked Alford, and I, like the rest, felt a tingling in the stomach, for the blood was real, the battle was real, a defeat to the bitter end for the colonists, and the Star men for a moment forgot that the episode, written by the moving finger of history, was long ago an ink-dried rusty memory.

While everyone was held by the drama of the filming I slipped out of the Monitor Room and cut the secondary alarm circuit with my wire-cutters. I had already cut the primary circuit. For the half-hour or so that we had no alarm system, I was taking a chance, but I did not trust Harvard's most eminent historian. And with Meredith safely located in the Monitor Room audience I'd have time to restore the circuits during the general relaxation after the set.

Then I went down in the galley which was deserted, as most of the boys were up watching Alford work. I poured a foaming beaker of orange juice, put it on a silver tray and went up to the Best Technician's quarters.

When I entered the room, Belmont had his big thumb on the General Alarm system button, a satisfied smirk on his face. He

thought he was alerting the whole ship, destroying Alford's set. But I'll give him credit for carrying off his pretense with Harvardian nonchalance.

"I can never ring up that god-dam striker," he cried in a sudden, assumed rage when he saw me.

"Yessir. Your orange juice, sir."

"Ah-uh-yes, rather, thank you, Second."

He listened a moment. The whole ship was quiet.

"Alford's making a set, I suppose."

"He is that."

Belmont sighed. He swished the orange juice around in a glass and frowned on it.

"Ah, well, Second," he sighed. "I don't suppose you've got a spot of gin?"

I nodded and started to get the gin.

The door opened. A strange, tall gray man stood there with a blank face—

Only it wasn't a face. It wasn't a man. It was a Philosterian.

NO one will ever know how they sneaked up on us. The manner in which we zigzagged to catch the centuries-old earthlight rays took us, of course, past and through potential battle areas, and there was nothing to be done about that.

No doubt their commander was

pleasantly surprised when he found that he could come right up on us without the usual long range fire. They hate our long range rays—they like to grapple with us, for in close combat it takes a whole drum of bullets to stop one of them and our close rays are ineffective.

Anyway, they had grappled and, due to my wire-cutting spree, were able to breach the ship without warning.

I debated for a whole millionth of a second whether to stand by the good Doctor Belmont and try to save him or whether to rush a verbal warning to the unsuspecting crew in the Monitor Room and decided that Belmont was no longer important. I was past the Philosterian in a rush before he could lift his short, murderous space pike. I tumbled down the corridor feeling extremely sorry for Dr. Belmont and the Harvard Historical Department. They'd lost a fine man there.

But when I got almost to the Monitor Room, I saw there was no need of warning. The Philosterians were all over the ship. Further, they had the good sense to breach at the top where the officers' quarters and control panels were. The corridors were full of cursing, screaming, fighting men, and our only chance was to hurry below and make a stand in the en-

listed quarters. As I piled down the stairs I ran into my Third, hobbling along on his aluminum crutches.

"Meredith!" I gasped. "Alford!"

"Below, I think, sir." His face was white, but the years of Star Office discipline paid off. He picked his way carefully over a dead man, taking his time, free of panic.

I ran on down the corridor and into my first bit of luck. A sub-machine gun of a type hurriedly reactivated for this war hung crazily from the rack that the earlier, fleeing men had nearly emptied. I grabbed it and turned to see if the Philosterians had come down yet.

They had. One came up behind our crippled Third. I yelled. The poor Third turned and lashed out with his light metal crutch. The Philosterian drove into him with his short pike and the blood exploded out of the poor Third's body.

The corridor filled with thunder as I read off the bullets at the Philosterian. The bullets sliced into the gray stuff of his being and right on through. A Philosterian has the happy faculty of moving his center of being, his heart-mind, as they call it, to any portion of his body. They'll only fall when they're punctured like

a sieve. But I had the first one on his hands and knees for what he did to our Third. I gave him the rest of the drum and I got him. Not that it helped much; there were about twenty behind.

At that moment I decided that I was good only for the duration of one or two more drums of ammunition before they'd close with me, and I stuck one under my arm, filled the gun with the other and kept shooting, giving back to enlisted quarters. The flying stuff slowed them down, but they kept coming.

I reached a point opposite the Recreation Room door. It burst open and out came the blond little historian with something in his hands.

I HAD just finished a drum and blasted down the second Philosterian. I paused to re-load and then saw what he carried.

"What are you doing, sir, with that bow and those arrows?" I shouted at Alford.

"Why, I don't shoot a gun very well," he answered calmly.

Then he pulled back and got off a wooden shaft at the foremost Philosterian.

"Rays won't stop 'em, sir, nor metal! Your wooden bows and arrows are a waste of time!" I shouted, trying to shove him behind me.

"There is evidence to the contrary," he said getting off another arrow.

I looked. In that narrow corridor he had driven the arrow through one man and into another. Both men had dropped in their tracks and were screaming a Philosterian death cry of agony. His next arrow got two more, but most amazing of all—the Philosterians were hesitating, pointing to their own fallen, and babbling among themselves.

"Incidentally," said Alford, "in the eighteen months of the war has anybody in the Star Office thought of trying wooden weapons on these people?"

He got off another arrow. The Philosterians were falling back in confusion.

"I don't think so," I said.

"If cellulose happens to be poisonous to them," said Alford, "there might not be a need to fight them wastefully with bullets or rays."

I lowered my Thompson sub-machine gun in amazement. The Philosterians were definitely fleeing. No Starofficeman had ever seen the Philosterians turn and run. And, by God, come to think of it, there's not a single wooden item in all of the thousands and thousands of objects, large and small, that it takes to run a US Star ship. I know. When I was

a Primary, I, like every other officer, had had to serve a stint as Supply Officer. Everything aboard a US Star ship had to be a gleaming metal gadget, nor had any Philosterians ever been taken alive to experiment with back on earth.

Alford had found a means of stopping the Philosterians where the Star Office, the nation and the whole world had failed.

WE cleaned out the ship in about half an hour, using Alford's arrows over and over again. Some of the men armed themselves with his arrows and used them like daggers. As long as the pikes of the enemy didn't strike first, it took them down every time. Even a deep scratch would send them into shock, for it appeared that wood or cellulose was deadly poison to their bodies. We fought that battle like a bunch of delirious high school kids, and it was my privilege to drive an arrow through the something-like shoulder blades of a Philosterian standing over a wounded Captain Meredith and about to finish him off with his pike as Meredith defended the control panels

For which Meredith rolled over, sat up, glared at me and said: "Second, why aren't you at your battle post!" Then he fainted.

It was only when the men cross-

ed over and were gleefully cleaning out the doomed Philosterian ship itself that I suddenly remembered poor Belmont and grasped Alford by the sleeve.

"Belmont," I groaned. "Alone in the BT quarters. Every Philosterian that came in must have gone down his corridor."

Alford seemed to turn yellow. "He would plead for his miserable life," he said, "but he would die in the end like a gentleman, I'm sure. Hurry, Second, hurry—"

We pelted up to BT quarters. The door was stuck and I could see that there had been plenty of Philosterians there. Then Alford stopped and handed me his bow and remaining arrows.

"You go in, Second. I used to have a goodly amount of contempt for Dr. Belmont, but—well—we have experienced much together, after all and I might be too excited to shoot the bastard that got him."

I thought I saw a soldiery tear in his eye. I jerked open the door and went in.

Dr. Belmont stood there, gasping and panting like a walrus. His clothes were nearly torn from him. He looked like a man who had just finished a gang fight. He had. There were at least six large Philosterians stretched out dead around him. In his hands the remaining fragments of his fine,

black-painted wooden chair from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"It took you long enough, Second," he said, tossing aside the kindling wood. "I had to bash them severely. At one point I greatly feared I would strain my heart, but I found my Harvard second wind."

Then Alford burst into the room and cried. "Belmont, glad you survived. You'll be pleased to know —"

"Need you shout like an ill-educated Yale man?" puffed Belmont, collapsing to a sitting position on his bed.

Alford lowered his voice, regained his aplomb. "As a matter of fact," he said, "Yale has solved the Philosterian menace. I stopped them with my bows and arrows. Wood stops them, a contribution for which the History Department of Yale must take full credit."

"On the contrary," said Belmont, "the beggars reached me first, and it was Harvard quick thinking and Harvard wood that stopped them first. I greatly fear that the credit must go to Cambridge."

They glared at each other. Then Alford turned to me. "Tell him," said Alford. "After all, I saved your life."

"Perhaps some of the credit should go to MIT and the rest to Abercrombie and Fitch Sporting

Goods store," I said rapidly ducking out.

THEY both got medals. Plus a bushelful of grateful donations to their respective universities, commendations from the President and Congress, the UN, various other governments and public bodies and millions of pleased citizens. I understand the celebration back on earth was something to see. And on board the COLOSSUS there was another celebration in which both the gentlemanly scholars took plenty of gin in their orange juice, I understand.

But I wouldn't know because I wasn't there. I am under arrest, awaiting trial. The COLOSSUS is a great and famous Starship now, and its valiant crew will live forever in the annals of thrilling war deeds, but its Second will be lucky to avoid the military penal colony. There's the matter of the jiggered alarm systems, and under Star Office regulations as administered by a Captain like Meredith a rule is a rule.

The Star men have a saying which is applicable. "Star men fear no enemy in all of space, but God protect them from the Star Office."

THE END

Roger was fundamentally content with his wife, but he had heard glowing accounts of the Martian girls—so naturally he wanted his own—

Private Secretary

by

Ed Ritter

ROGER FRISBEE didn't need the money. The only reason he took the government job in the first place was so he could have one of those Martian secretaries.

He knew better than to go into, say, the State Department, where they hired beautiful human girls. He knew Mrs. Frisbee would put her foot down on a thing like that. But in the Department of Interplanetary Affairs, where for reason of reciprocity they hired only red-haired Martians and cold-side Venusians — why, he had never dreamed she could be so unreasonable as that.

After all, the Martian girls were not very pretty, by human standards. Even perfectly shaped legs do not arouse a man too much when there are three of them, and osculating with Martians was likely to be a bit confusing since they

had two mouths, and a tendency to wink their single red eye when emotionally excited. Still Roger wanted one. Compared to Mrs. Frisbee, he felt that any change would be a change for the better. But she said no.

That didn't mean she said no once. She said it several hundred times. She did real well what with having only one mouth. All evening long, and still the following morning at the breakfast table.

"I don't intend to tell you again," she said again. "No Martian secretary. That's final." The steel trap in her jaw closed. The spring was tense, alert for action.

"Now, dear . . ." Roger said.
"No."

"But be reasonable—" Roger sighed, "it's honorable to work. And all the other men have secretaries."

"Don't grovel, Roger," she said. "It's childish, and it upsets me. A man of your age should act it. Besides, me in my condition." She referred, Roger knew, to a mild case of space poisoning, contracted twenty-three years before on their honeymoon, from which she apparently was never going to get better, or, unfortunately, worse.

"Are you ill, dear?" Roger became solicitous. He leaned across the table, pecking lightly at the blue veins in her nose.

A tear ran down her cheek, caught on the end of her chin and dangled there.

"Say you still love me, silly boy."

"Oh, but I do, I do," said Roger.

"You don't mean it," she said.
"Say you don't mean it."

"Now, honey-sweetums, you know better than that!"

Mrs. Frisbee's thoughts drifted back through the years. It was hard to remember Roger now, as a young space pilot, dressed up in his shiny kovar suit. She had wanted him. She always wondered if it was the money . . . No, she thought, it wasn't that. He really loves me. She scratched a wart reflectively. Maybe she was being mean and selfish. She should relent.

She relented.

"Roger," she said, "I've made a decision. You can have a secre-

tary. A Venusian."

Roger's face went white.

"They're nothing but snakes."

"Now Roger, you know that isn't so. They're just like human beings, they just look different."

Roger steadied himself against the table. He was demoralized. "They have a grey head the size of a peanut," he said, "and tentacles, dozens of tentacles with cusps on them. And they're slimy."

"They're very efficient stenographers, I understand. And file clerks. And since, after all, you consider your work an honorable duty to society, certainly you'll want an efficient assistant. Why — Roger. Are *you* ill?"

He had collapsed into his chair. His eyes bugged out, his face took on the skin tones and texture of a raisin.

"Oh, my poor Roger," she said. "I'll put you to bed. I'll take care of you. I won't let you work—"

Roger sprang from his chair. "Oh no you don't! I mean—not even sickness will keep me from my duty!"

He staggered out the door, jumped into his sports-flyer, and stopped off at the first bar he found open.

HE had eight very dry double Marstinis. At the end of

five he got to thinking about Venusians. They were strange creatures. They had no mouths. They lived mostly on soups and gruels which they absorbed through their tentacles by osmosis. The process was very efficient. They coiled three or four tentacles up in a bowl of consomme, and psst—it was gone.

After the sixth he started talking to himself about Martians. The bartender leered. "They ain't much to look at," he smirked, "but oh boy how they make with that double mouth!"

"That's really true, huh?" Roger asked.

"Oh, brother," the bartender said. "We had one in here the other night. She was a card. She was kissin' some guy and drinking bourbon at the same time. He got looped before she did. You shoulda seen it, and then—"

"That's enough," Roger said, visibly impressed.

After the seventh he thought of Mrs. Frisbee.

After the eighth he decided to go to work and look into this Venusian thing.

He got there shortly after ten o'clock. His chief came in just before lunch.

"Well," he said, beaming and rubbing his hands together, "how do you like your new job?"

"Oh, very well, thank you," Roger said. "It's quite interesting. I really feel it's my duty, you know."

"You're quite happy, then? Well, fine. I'm glad to hear it. We do want our employees to be happy."

"There is one little thing—" Roger said.

"Yes?"

"Well, I don't want to complain since I really like the work, and it's my duty. But the load seems a little heavy. I could really do a better job if I had a private secretary."

"Oh certainly," the chief said. "We have several just waiting to fill vacancies. That would be quite an easy matter to take care of. Now, just what did you have in mind?"

"Well, I had in mind a Martian, but because of certain things, well—"

The chief nodded sympathetically, "You needn't explain," he said. "I understand. I'm a married man myself. However—"

"So I guess I'd better have a Venusian. My wife says they're terribly efficient."

"Well, some are, and some aren't," the chief said. "Now, did you want a cold-side or a hot-side Venusian?"

"A hot-side Venusian?" Roger frowned. "What's that? I never

heard of such a thing."

The chief winked. "Well now," he said, "that's classified information. I don't mind telling you, just keep it confidential."

Roger nodded.

"Well, all right then. Human beings first landed on the cold-side of Venus. They civilized the so-called people they found there, and developed serums so they could be brought to Earth as workers. It was only ten years ago that we were able to penetrate thru to the hot side, five years ago that we started bringing back the hot-side inhabitants. They turned out to be very different from the cold-siders." He looked quizzically at Roger. "You understand that this is very classified?"

"Certainly," Roger said.

"I'd rather have you find this out for yourself," the chief said. "I'll go down and pick out a good one, and send her up to you."

He left. Five minutes later there

was a gentle knock on the door.

"Come in," Roger said.

"I'm Mimi," she said. She came over and sat down on Roger's desk.

He observed that she was about five foot two, blonde, blue-eyed (two), beautifully legged (two) she had a rosebud mouth (one) she was so utterly gorgeous, so supremely luscious, so exquisitely exquisite, so—

"Can I do anything for you?" she asked, moving closer . . .

"**H**OW did it go at the office today?" Mrs. Frisbee asked.

"Very well, thank you," Roger answered.

"And you got your secretary?"

"Yes," Roger said, making a face. "A Venusian."

"Quite efficient, I trust," Mrs. Frisbee said.

"Oh yes," Roger said. "Quite."

THE END

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